Centre for Ageing Better

Digital skills to connect

in partnership with:

Citizens Online

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Summary

Executive Summary

The world we live in becomes increasingly reliant on digital technology and channels each year.

Advances in digital technology are changing the way our societies work, and the ways we interact. They alter our access to the social and emotional support, and relationships which help us feel part of community life – and sustain us in times of crisis.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, people without access to the internet were already at a severe disadvantage in terms of accessing essential goods, services, job opportunities and financial support. The pandemic has dramatically exacerbated this situation. People – many for the first time – have increasingly had to rely on the internet and digital devices to get things done, and to participate fully in society. This involves using digital technology to:

– Order food and register for priority delivery slots;

– Work from home;

– Access and attend healthcare appointments, and manage prescriptions;

– Navigate government and health guidance, and access tests for COVID-19;

– Apply for financial support associated with self-isolation, furlough, unemployment benefits or other loss of income support;

– Keep in touch with friends, family and stay connected, including through social groups.

The Centre for Aging Better commissioned Citizens Online – a digital skills and inclusion charity – to conduct this research in order to answer three key questions:

– **Are there people aged 50-70 who have missed out by not being online during this time?**

– **Which types of organisation and people have been delivering digital skills training/support to people aged 50-70?**

– **How have these organisations changed their service delivery?**

During the pandemic, there has been considerable focus on digital exclusion for people at the older end of the age spectrum, and around younger people in families with school-age children. However, it is also important to look at the experiences of people in mid-life with regard to digital exclusion and digital skills.

To answer these questions we used online surveys, receiving 579 analysable responses between November 2020 and January 2021. In order to ensure we reached people who are not online – we commissioned a phone poll representative of 50-70 year olds on living on lower household incomes, conducted in mid-November 2020. We also conducted 17 in-depth interviews with individuals and organisations to deepen understanding between November 2020 and March 2021.

Our key findings are:

There is a significant digital divide among 50-70 year olds, exacerbated by the pandemic. Around 1 million were offline at the start of the pandemic (ONS, 2019). While the majority of people aged 50-70 are internet users, people living in households with lower incomes are less likely to be online (Lloyds Bank, 2018). Our phone poll found 27% of people aged 50-70 with an annual household incomes under £25,000 were offline before the pandemic.

Some respondents who were offline found it difficult to:

– Connect with family, friends and neighbours (14%);

– Had difficulty accessing health services and information (8%) ;

– And found paying for goods and services difficult (7%).

Some people who were online at the start of the pandemic also experienced challenges around the need to undertake new tasks digitally and needed support. Appendix 1 provides case studies featuring individuals aged 50-70.

Organisations have rapidly adapted to COVID-19 restrictions to continue or start new forms of digital support. This has been a hugely challenging time for organisations. Our research found impressive adaptation, awareness of the need for digital support, and huge enthusiasm to help. The amazing efforts of people involved deserve recognition. Around two-thirds of organisations who responded to our research were able to move services online or to telephone, and a similar proportion had phoned their service users to find out their support needs. Device loan schemes were popular, with a third of organisations starting up a scheme during the pandemic. Case study examples of how organisations adapted their support are also included in Appendix 1.

The lack of awareness of organisations offering digital skills support is a significant factor in persistent digital exclusion. Our phone poll found that the overwhelming majority of respondents did not know of an organisation where they could get help to use digital technology (87%). This is important – digital inclusion is not only about being online: internet users can lack skills or confidence and need digital support when encountering unfamiliar tasks (including even those who are generally confident). During the pandemic, people have mainly relied on informal support from family and friends, or have experienced exclusion as a result. There is a real need to increase awareness of available support not only among people who may need it, but those who can provide a signposting role.

A wide-variety of organisations provide some form of digital support – and support needs are varied. We advocate an embedded approach where digitally excluded people can be identified and supported within a digital inclusion network. We recommend forming local digital inclusion networks that communicate a 'single point of contact', but also use peer and other trusted networks to signpost and refer for digital help depending on needs.

Our case studies show how organisations have responded to challenges during the pandemic. They explore the experiences of different organisations and highlight best practice. Such as:

– **Offering assisted digital support to digitally excluded people** – enabling people to access goods and services without having to get online (Ageless Thanet, Northfield Neighbourhood Network, 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 though 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).

Marketing of digital support needs improvement. There is a clear need for further research on effective language and hooks to entice people to engage with digital support. As well as improving reach, this needs to reckon with the reality that 91% of 50-70 year olds use the internet at least weekly (ONS, 2020a). Some are irritated by the ways their age group are regularly depicted as offline or requiring digital support purely because of their age. Targeting support highlighting the different types of things people can do online helps to give people a reason that it is 'for them'. Also offering support with new online tasks has been successful during the pandemic and provides an alternative to targeting just based on age and 'getting online'.

Remote support has benefits beyond its role in the pandemic. The traditional model of providing digital skills support in a venue during business hours excludes many people. Accessing support over the phone, in your own home, at a time that suits can be more convenient to learners, especially those with caring responsibilities and transport or mobility issues. Remote support can enable organisations to reach more people.

Delivering remote digital skills support is a challenge for organisations and learners. While there are benefits to adopting remote support methods, not being able to see a learner's device when navigating problems means support from digital champions (people who are confident to help others with digital skills) takes much longer and requires even more patience from both parties. Once a learner can access a video calling service, remote support becomes easier. Providing remote support is often new to organisations, and considerable effort, including staff training, is needed to make it meaningful and effective for learners. Many learners and digital champions value face-to-face support and look forward to this returning. Remote support should be an additional offer, not a replacement.

Organisations need financial and peer support to promote digital inclusion. Small, local organisations are best placed to reach digitally excluded populations. But they are often financially stretched and have little capacity for their own digital skills development let alone supporting service users. Where possible, it's beneficial to embed digital support in these organisations – even where this is not their specialism or purpose. Where this is not possible, enabling them to use their trusted relationships with service users to triage and signpost digitally excluded people to other organisations in the local area is important. In both cases, sustained funding and well-publicised access to resources are necessary. It's not enough to provide devices alone; organisations need to be able to provide recipients with wrap-around digital skills support.

Digital exclusion has not been solved during the pandemic. Many people do not want to use the internet, and recent prompts have not changed their minds about this. When asked "why you do not use the internet?" more than half of respondents to our phone poll of 50-70 year olds on lower incomes who were offline at the start of the pandemic told us "I don't feel the need to – it's not for me" (56%). We support efforts to communicate the benefits of being online and ensure that everyone has access to digital support. We also would stress that being offline should be a valid option and catered for by providing offline forms of access. Government, businesses, public and community services must remember their responsibility to those who are not online and provide alternative non-digital ways for people to interact with them.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated the extent of the digital divide across the country.

Guidance and legislation introduced to limit the impacts of a new virus have produced new reasons – and requirements – for people to get online, or do more online. We look at the impact on people aged 50-70 who experienced barriers related to digital technology and the internet, which we refer to as **digital exclusion.**

This report also looks at the experiences of organisations that have been providing digital support to people aged 50-70. With face-to-face support lost as a result of the pandemic, some have moved to telephone and video-calls to support people. Providing support remotely has presented a number of challenges to both service providers and users.

In addition, the closure of libraries and community centres has highlighted the lack of access to devices and connectivity, with many people struggling to afford devices and data packages. Many local community groups have been delivering devices or digital skills training either as a standalone offer or as part of a wider programme.

Some organisations, including those that formed in response to the pandemic itself, have discovered the issues of digital exclusion affect people they are supporting and started providing digital support for the first time. Support has been hugely valued by people facing the combined challenges of the pandemic, lockdown and other restrictions, and digital exclusion.

Michael, 64, is retired and lives in Brighton with his four dogs. He used to use computers at work, but when he retired lost access to a computer. About two years ago he began using the internet via a smartphone, but this was very challenging due to the size of the screen and his eyesight.

When the pandemic hit, he was deemed clinically vulnerable and advised to "shield." He wanted to do more for himself online but couldn't afford a more appropriate device – instead relying on a neighbour to shop for him.

He received a letter from Brighton & Hove City Council listing available support, telling us he would not have known where to go for digital support until he received the letter. He called the Digital Brighton & Hove Support Line and received a laptop through the organisations' refurbishment scheme in partnership with TechTakeBack, together with support from a digital champion.

"Thanks to you and your colleagues I've been able to [use the internet] more than I did before…. It's a fantastic freedom… keeps your life going instead of just sitting stagnating while this virus ruins the world, you can go out and see the world as it was or as it could be…."

Michael, 64, Brighton

Methodology

This research aimed to answer three key research questions around the internet use and experiences of digital exclusion among people aged 50-70 during the pandemic, and the experiences of organisations supporting people in this age bracket:

1. Are there people aged 50-70 who have missed out by not being online during this time?

2. Which types of organisation and people have been delivering digital skills training/support?

3. How have organisations changed their service delivery?

To answer these questions, we conducted a rapid review of national datasets and research published during the pandemic. We also engaged with over 1,000 people through:

– A phone poll of 502 people representative of those aged 50-70 living with household incomes under £25,000, conducted between 18 and 20 November, 2020

– Two online surveys open from 26 November 2020 until 17 January 2021:

> One of organisations providing support, collecting 252 responses

> One of people aged 50-70, collecting 327 responses (using the same questions as the phone poll)

– In-depth interviews with nine organisations and eight people aged 50-70, conducted between 11 November 2020 and 9 March 2021.

The report is divided into sections based on findings from the different elements of the research, rather than taking these elements separately. Full case studies are provided in Appendix 1, key data and findings from the rapid review in Appendix 2, more details regarding the methodology in Appendix 3, and a bibliography in Appendix 4.

Our phone poll was designed to be representative of the 4.6 million people aged 50-70 living on gross household incomes of £25,000 or less across the UK as a whole (27% of the 16.7 million 50-70 year olds across the UK as of the 2018 ONS estimate, see Appendix 3 for details). The rest of our research is intended to be illustrative rather than statistically representative.

It is important to note that we will not have heard from some of the most excluded people aged 50-70 (those not only without the ability to fill in an online survey, but also without a landline) and likewise organisations that have found the pandemic most challenging (those that were forced to close or furlough all staff are least likely to have responded to our online survey of organisations).

We feel it is essential the voices of those aged 50-70 and those providing digital support are heard, but do not pretend that they speak for either all in this age group nor all organisations providing such support. Our case studies were targeted to represent diversity in people, locations and types of organisations. We included organisations specialising either in digital support or support for people aged 50-70, generating responses from organisations based in rural, urban, and deprived locations, and organisations working with different demographic groups (see Figure 1 and Appendix 2 for more details).

We hope that the findings of the combined research can inform and inspire individuals and organisations working with digitally excluded people across England.

"One of the biggest positive sides of the pandemic is that people have become much more aware of digital inclusion issues – they may well have been helping friends and family and also recognise that there's a wider issue in our society around digital inclusion."

Katie Knight, Digital Brighton & Hove (case study interview)

Figure 1: Responses to online survey of organisations by type – most common types of organisations

Type of organisation	Responses	Responses (%)
Local Organisation	96	38.1
Mutual Aid/Neighbourhood Group	44	17.5
Library/Libraries Service	20	7.9
Council	13	5.2
Age UK brand partner	12	4.8
Education	11	4.4
Housing Provider	11	4.4
Charity	7	2.8
Partnership	6	2.4
Council for Voluntary Services (or similar)	5	2.0
Public Service	5	2.0
National Charity	4	1.6
Regional Charity	4	1.6

Findings

The report is divided into sections based on thematic findings from the different elements of the research.

Rather than taking the different elements (online surveys of organisations and 50-70 year-olds, national phone poll of 50-70 year-olds on lower incomes, and in-depth interviews) separately, these have been considered together.

Where appropriate, findings from our own research are placed in the context of key national data or other research conducted during the pandemic. Our focus is on the 16.8 million people aged 50-70 in England (quarter of the population) – we make clear where we are talking about either a particular subset of this group or digitally excluded people more broadly.

Internet use and digital exclusion during the pandemic

A significant digital divide

The number of older people who are online has increased in recent years, but age remains the biggest risk factor to indicate if someone is digitally excluded. This is the case across all aspects of digital exclusion: being offline, lacking access to devices, having low/no digital skills, and lower confidence, motivation, or breadth of internet use (Lloyds Bank, 2020; see also ONS, 2020a, 2019, and Appendix 2 for more).[1] However, there are other risk factors to consider as well – including lower income.

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[1]The quality of available connectivity is also a factor in digital exclusion but this is less often related to age, except where this intersects with rurality – connectivity is often more of an issue in rural areas, and rural populations can often have an older skew (Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, 2021).

In total, around 8% of people aged 50 to 69 (15.5 million people) are not recent Internet users or have never used the Internet: over one million people (1,243,000).[2] While the proportion is low among 50 to 69 year-olds, the age group accounts for 32% of the approximately 3 million people in Great Britain who were not recent Internet users or had never used the Internet in 2019 (the majority, 67%, are aged 70 or over; Figure 2, ONS, 2020a)[3].

Figure 2: Proportion of people who have never been online / use the internet at least once a day, by age band, 2019 (ONS, 2020a)

People aged 50-69 make up 32% of people who are offline

Legend: 18–49, 50–69, 70 and over

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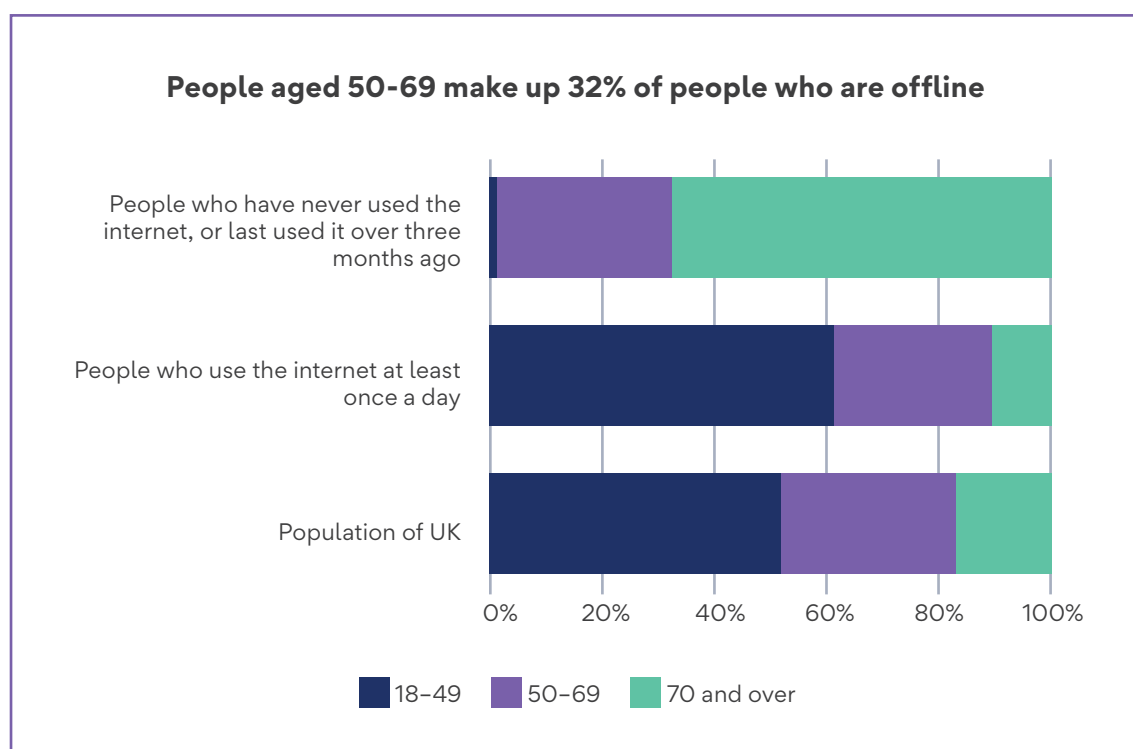
[2]The 8% figure from the ONS is made up of people whom have "never used the internet" (6.2%, 961,000), last used the internet "more than a year ago" (1.2%, 180,000), or last used the internet "Between 3 months and a year ago" (0.7%, 102,000).

[3]The ONS has published new estimates regarding internet users (2021c) but these use age brackets that are not amenable to comparisons for people aged 50-70, our target demographic group. This data shows that internet use is increasing among relevant demographic groups, however. The headline figure is that, across the UK rather than Great Britain as in our statistic above, an estimated 4.2 million people are not recent Internet users or have never used the Internet (7.8% of the population) – down from 4.8 million (9%) in 2019. The proportion of 45-54 year olds who are not online is estimated to have fallen from 2.4% to 1.9%, for 55-64 year olds from 6.7% to 5.3%, and for 65-74 year olds from 16.7% to 14.4%.

However, age alone does not explain the digital divide. We know that low income is also a key risk factor in digital exclusion. Lloyds Bank (2021), for example, estimate that "55% of those offline earn under £20,000." Because of this, we focused our phone poll on people aged 50-70 with household incomes under £25,000/year. Of these respondents, 27% either "do not use the internet," or "use the internet, but have only started using it since the coronavirus pandemic" (phone poll; Figure 3).

Our research emphasises the role income, as well as age, plays as a risk factor. The 27% of our respondents represents a much higher proportion than the 8% of 50-69 year olds the ONS reports as not being internet users mentioned above. It implies that the majority of those aged 50-70 who are offline (around 1.2 million people) are those living on household incomes under £25,000 (around 994,000 people).[4] In short, there is a digital divide within the age bracket of people aged 50-70. This is just one example of how digital exclusion intersects with other forms of deprivation, marginalisation and social exclusion.

Figure 3: Which of the following best describes your internet use? This could include email, online shopping, using an app, or social media like Facebook (phone poll of 50-70 year olds on lower incomes)

Proportion of respondents (n=502)

I use the internet and was using it before the coronavirus pandemic — 70%

I do not use the internet — 26%

I rarely used the internet before the coronavirus pandemic but now I use it a lot more — 3%

I use the internet, but have only started using it since the coronavirus pandemic — 1%

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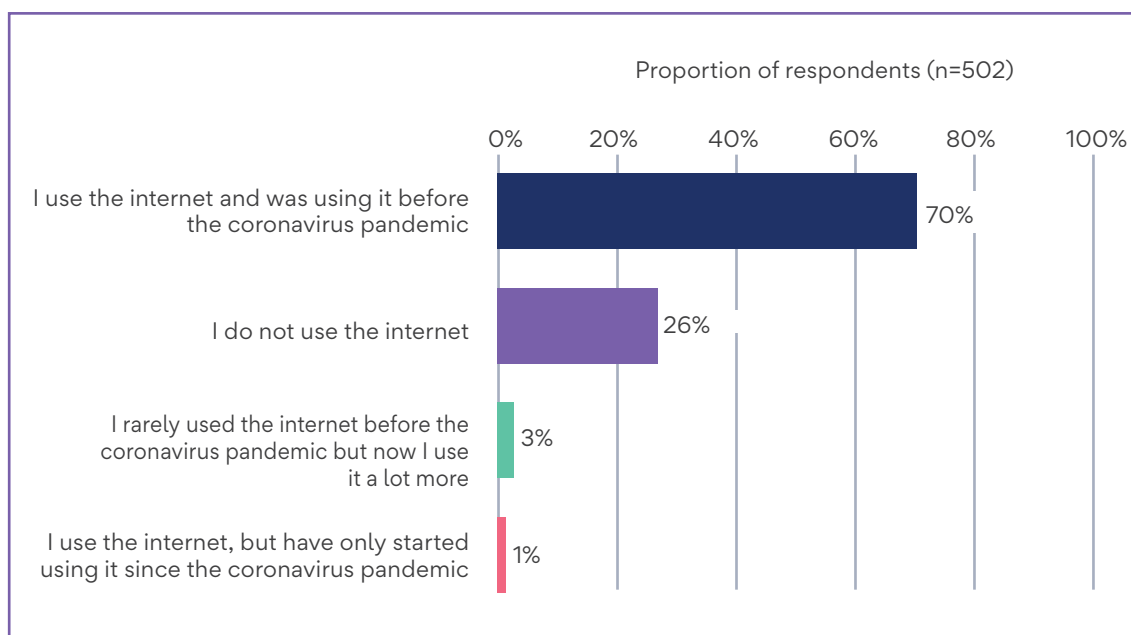
[4] 26% of respondents to our phone poll of 50-70 year-olds on lower incomes saying they "do not use the internet" and 1% who "have only started using [the internet] since the coronavirus pandemic" makes 27% who were not online in February 2020. The ONS (2021) estimates there were 3.7 million people aged 50-70 with gross income of less than £25,000 living in England in 2019/20. 27% of 3.7million is 994,000. Previous ONS estimates for 2019 (ONS, 2020a) report 1,243,000 people aged 50-69 have never used the internet or last used it over three months ago. While our sample was small, and the true figure/proportion of people may be lower than the 80% these figures imply, income is clearly a factor.

Our research emphasises the role income, as well as age, plays as a risk factor. The 27% of our respondents represents a much higher proportion than the 8% of 50-69 year olds the ONS reports as not being internet users mentioned above. It implies that the majority of those aged 50-70 who are offline (around 1.2 million people) are those living on household incomes under £25,000 (around 994,000 people). In short, there is a digital divide within the age bracket of people aged 50-70. This is just one example of how digital exclusion intersects with other forms of deprivation, marginalisation and social exclusion.

Crucially, digital exclusion and the need for digital support are not only about being offline. Ofcom and others talk about the concept of "limited use" or "narrow" internet users. Ofcom (2018b) state that a quarter of all UK adult internet users can be classified as "narrow" users[5] , but that those aged 55+ are particularly likely to be classified in this category: 32% for 55 to 64-year-olds, 49% for 65 to 74-year-olds and 55% for those aged 75+. Yates and others (2015: 17) emphasise, "those with the least access, who are making the least use and the least varied use of the internet, are older adults **or those in social class group DE**"[6] (emphasis added). In summary, the digital divide exists not only between 50-70 year olds and younger population groups, but within the age group itself – with lower income 50-70 year olds much more likely to be narrow users or offline altogether.

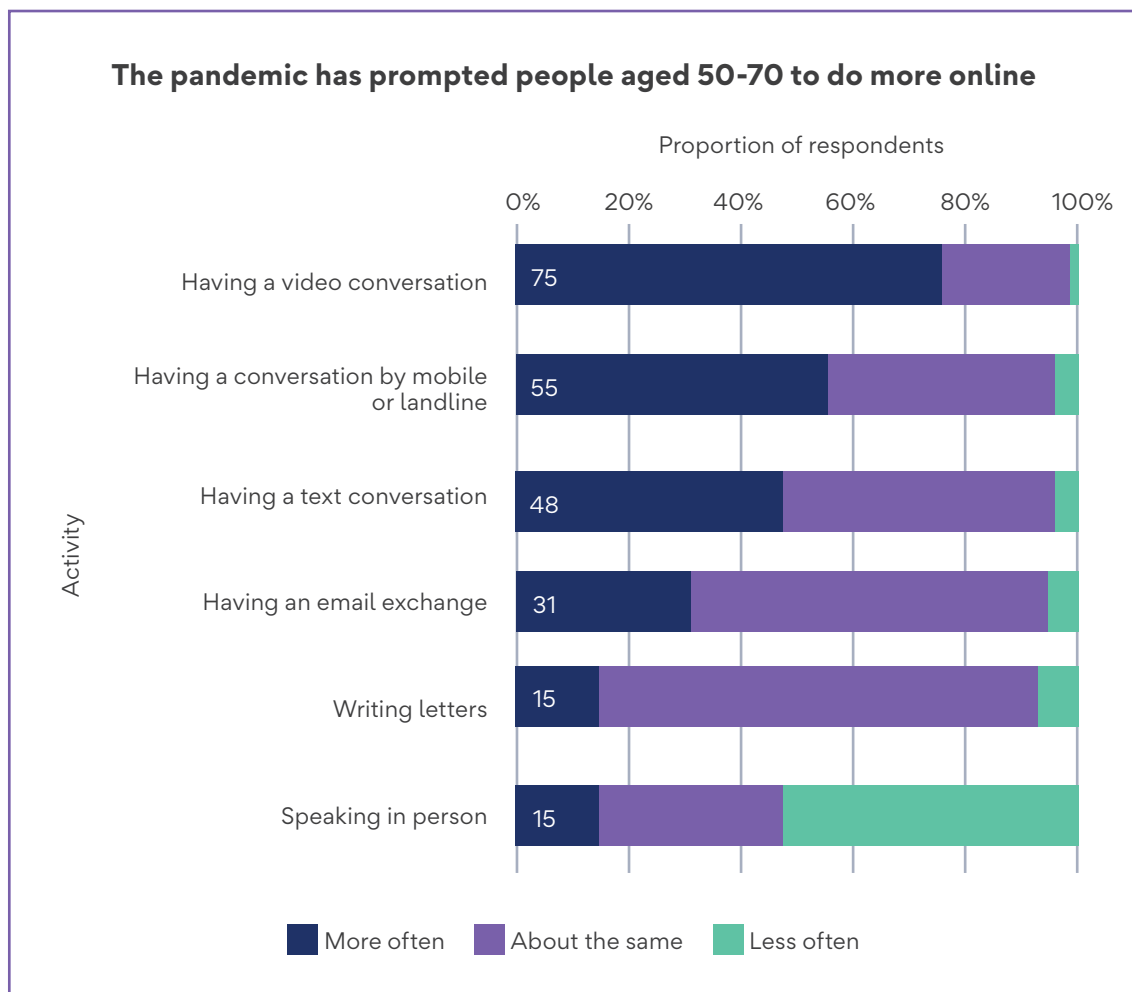## The pandemic has led people to do more online, or to get online

Our expectation when beginning this research was that the pandemic had prompted many people to use the internet more, and a greater number to engage with organisations helping them to do so for the first time. Previous research by the Centre for Ageing Better (2020a) found that since the pandemic there had been significant increases in use of digital technology among those aged 50-70 years who were already online (Figure 4):

– 75% were video-calling more often

– 48% were having text conversations more frequently than they were before

– 31% were emailing more often

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[5]"Narrow" users are defined by Ofcom as those who only carry out four of 15 types of online activity (as opposed to medium at 5-9 types, and broad at 10-15). The top five activities are listed as general surfing/browsing; sending/receiving emails; instant messaging; social networking, and online TV/TV viewing. These top five activities are broadly the same across age and socio-economic groups, although the proportions of the groups doing the various activities differ and there are exceptions to this list by age group.

[6]The NRS social grade system allocates households to different classifications based on the occupation of the head of the household. DE households are those defined as working class (D: semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers) or non-working (E: state pensioners, casual

Figure 4: Increased use of digital technology by people aged 50-70 during the pandemic (Centre for Ageing Better, 2020a)

The pandemic has prompted people aged 50-70 to do more online

Proportion of respondents

Activity	More often	About the same	Less often
Having a video conversation	75		
Having a conversation by mobile or landline	55		
Having a text conversation	48		
Having an email exchange	31		
Writing letters	15		
Speaking in person	15		

■ More often   ■ About the same   ■ Less often

However, Age UK's review of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) COVID-19 Sub-study reports, "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" (Age UK, 2021, emphasis added)[7]. Similarly, Lloyds (2021) find that 50-59 year-olds were less likely to say that their use of the internet has "increased a lot" since the pandemic – 17% of 60-69 year-olds and 24% of 50-59 year-olds agreed, compared to 34% of 30-39 year-olds. More than half of people in the age bracket said their digital skills had not "improved as a result of the outbreak of the Coronavirus" but did "feel they need improving" (54% of 60-69 year-olds and 59% of 50-59 year-olds).

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[7]This research found that "Two-fifths (39%) of people aged 52 plus in England say they are using the internet more since the start of the coronavirus." (Age UK, 2021). We cover further data on internet use since the pandemic from other research reports in Appendix 2.

This finding is confirmed in our own research. Our **phone poll found 4% of people aged 50-70** and living on incomes under £25,000 across the UK started using the internet, or **started using it more than "rarely" since the pandemic.**[8] This is roughly 1 in 8 of those who were offline or only using the internet rarely before the pandemic.[9] Though this is a small minority, it is important to acknowledge that the pandemic has produced prompts to increase skill levels, even for those who were confident internet users before the pandemic:

"I am proficient but that has increased over the last four years and particularly during the pandemic"

50-59 year-old woman, North East (online survey of 50-70 year olds)

Self-perception and motivation as barriers to internet use

There are a variety of reasons why people are not online or are digitally excluded, such as: low skills, confidence, poor-quality internet connectivity, or lack of suitable devices. When we asked about barriers to digital inclusion in our phone poll of 50-70 year olds on lower incomes, some mentioned the **prohibitive cost** of devices or internet connections/data ("don't have internet – can't afford it") – but only **2% of people said this was their main barrier.** More commonly (17%) of phone poll respondents offline said their lack of skills and lack of support ("no education on how to use it"). Some accessed the internet via people they knew – "proxy" access ("not interested in using it – my husband uses it but I don't"). However, **the most commonly identified barrier from 56% of people was related to self-perception and lack of motivation.**

Months into the pandemic – and despite associated prompts to use the internet – respondents to our phone poll (November 2020) described low levels of motivation, even resistance, to the idea of using the internet: "I just don't want to," "I feel as though it's better to use your brain rather than the internet," and "I don't like it… I also don't need it," for example. More than half of offline respondents said they don't use the internet because "I don't feel the need to – it's not for me" (56%).[10]

For five respondents (4% of 133 who were offline at the start of the pandemic), their reasons were explicitly related to their self-perception of their age and abilities ("I don't understand it – I'm too old" or "I'm getting older – I don't

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[8]1% said they "use the internet, but have only started using it since the coronavirus pandemic," 3% that they "rarely used the internaet before the coronavirus pandemic but I now use it a lot more."

[9]This would equate to around 147,000 people in this age and income bracket across England (183,000 across the UK), but extrapolation is difficult as our sample is small – just 20 people from the 502 person phone poll of 50-70 year olds on lower incomes.

[10]Again, this matches findings in the literature. The most recent Consumer Digital Index (Lloyds Bank, 2020) found that "over one-third of those offline say the Internet 'doesn't interest me' and 48% of the digitally excluded state that 'nothing' could motivate them to get online," for example.

understand it"). A few others mentioned concerns about privacy and security (3%, with comments such as "I don't trust it"). These responses from individuals to the phone poll were backed up in our online survey of organisations providing support:

"For some, it's the motivation to use devices in the first place, particularly for the older, long-term unemployed."

Age UK local brand partner, North West England, 230 employees, 30 volunteers (online survey of organisations)

"Fear and suspicion in respect of big tech and what might be done with their devices and content [is a barrier]. This was big at the beginning and is bigger now!"

Mutual aid group, region unknown, 50 volunteers (online survey of organisations)

In short, though many have experienced prompts to make greater use of the internet during the pandemic, others have not been convinced to get online. Digital exclusion continues to remain a problem.

Providing digital support in a time of crisis

Many venues that provide access to digital devices and other forms of support were affected by the requirements to close in the first national lockdown in March 2020.[11]

"Despite a call from the Carnegie UK Trust for a "vital digital safety net to those who need it... Public provision of digital access through libraries, health and welfare services and community organisations" (Bowyer and others, 2020), Libraries, UK Online Centres, and other community venues were forced to close their doors. Government restrictions have been eased during points in the pandemic and under COVID-secure guidelines indoor venues have been allowed to open."[12]

However, not all were able to do so, due to the nature of their location and COVID guidance, or because staff were shielding, for example. Public sector cuts and a challenging funding environment have seen a decline in community venues over the past decade, meaning fewer people have a library or other venues nearby (the number of libraries has been reduced by 17% since 2009/10).

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[11]"To reduce social contact, the government has required by law that certain businesses and venues close to the public. These include: pubs, cinemas and theatres; clothing and electronics stores; hair, beauty and nail salons; and outdoor and indoor markets (not selling food); libraries, community centres, and youth centres; indoor and outdoor leisure facilities such as bowling alleys, arcades and soft play facilities; communal places within parks, such as playgrounds, sports courts and outdoor gyms; places of worship (except for funerals); hotels, hostels, bed and breakfasts, campsites, caravan parks, and boarding houses for commercial/leisure use, excluding use by those who live in them permanently and those who are unable to return home" (Cabinet Office, 2020, emphasis added).

[12]For example, the government announced that libraries could reopen from 4th July 2020, subject to following COVID-19-secure guidelines (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2020b).

Even where community venues were open, access to digital devices has been more restricted. Many people have not been able to use their services when shielding, self-isolating, or because of a reluctance to risk using services or public transport during the pandemic.[13]

However, the need for support did not end – many organisations have moved to remote support models and often faced overwhelming demand. A number of national initiatives were launched either to support individuals directly or through support for organisations providing digital support (see box).

To address digital exclusion during the pandemic, a number of national initiatives were launched. These form the context for the work organisations we surveyed have engaged in:

– BT, Openreach, Virgin Media, Sky, TalkTalk, O2, Vodafone, Three, Hyperoptic, Gigaclear, and KCOM signed up to measures to: remove all data allowance caps on all current fixed broadband services, offer new mobile and landline packages to ensure people are connected and the most vulnerable continue to be supported, and work with customers who find it difficult to pay their bill as a result of COVID-19 (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2020a).

– In April 2020, the government launched The Skills Toolkit, an online learning platform offering free courses hosted on the gov.uk website to help people staying at home during the pandemic "build up their skills, progress in work and boost their job prospects." The new platform provides access to free, high-quality digital and numeracy courses from The Open University, Google, Amazon, and FutureLearn – together with the Good Things Foundations' Learn My Way and Make It Click (Department for Education, 2020).

– BT launched 'Top Tips on Tech' with ITV – a two week long daily series of how-to-guides during prime-time TV demonstrating digital skills like WhatsApp calls and booking online GP appointments (ITV, 2020), and pulled together free resources and information to help people and businesses with the challenges they have faced during lockdown, in partnership with leading digital skills, enterprise and community organisations (BT, 2021).

– Digital Unite collated guides and resources for 'Digital Champions' to operate remotely, and help learners with the challenges the pandemic raised (Digital Unite, 2020).

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[13]Nonetheless, around a third of people in the UK continued to engage with, often online, public library services, some of which offered tablet lending or distribution schemes, and digital support over the phone (Bowyer and others, 2020). After the pandemic, libraries will continue to be a core site for provision of digital support.
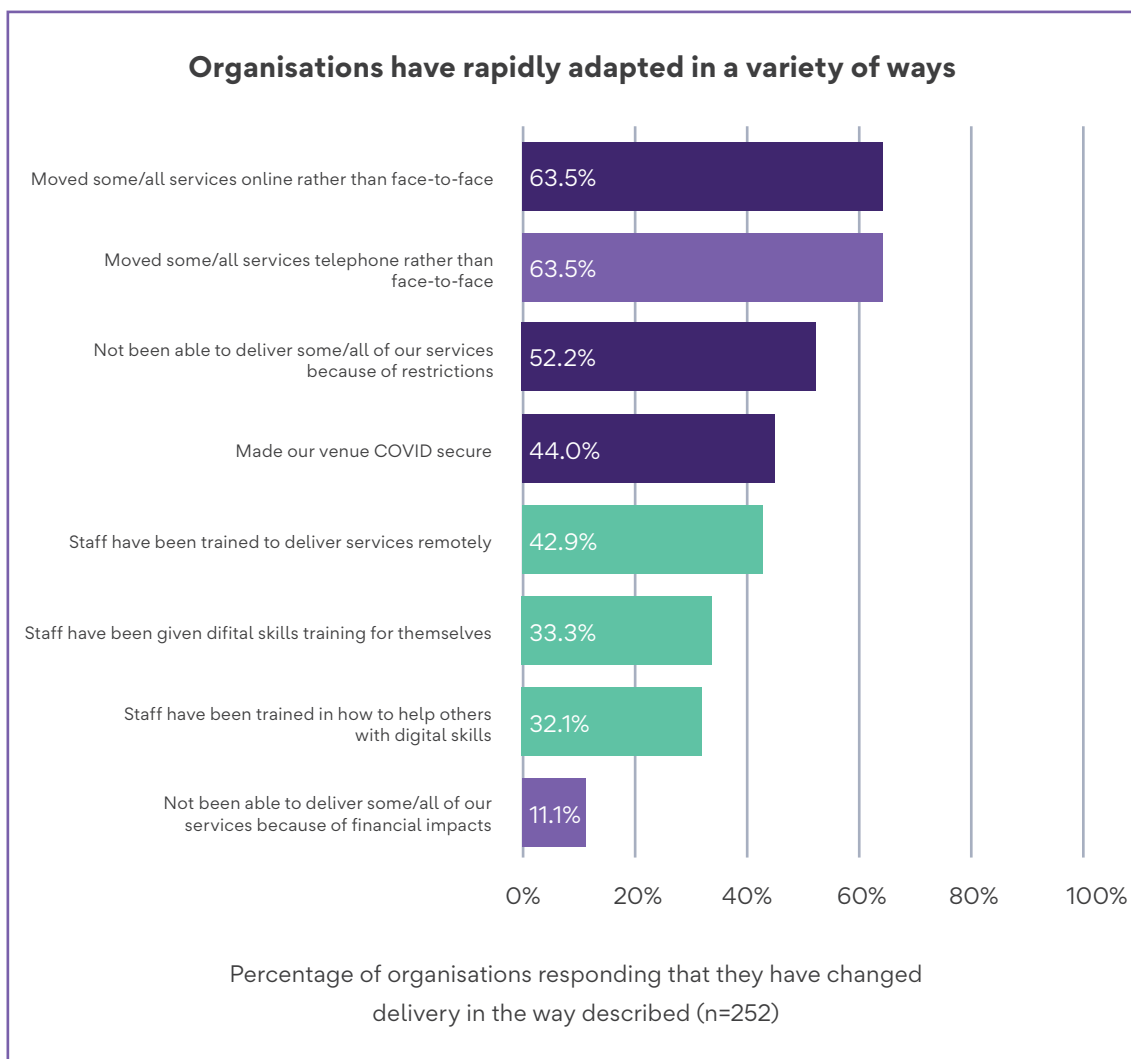
– Alongside developing COVID-19 relevant content for both Learn My Way and Make It Click, and removing the mandatory requirement to register to use their free digital skills platforms, Good Things Foundation launched an emergency COVID-19 Response & Resilience Fund. Small unrestricted grants of up to £3,000 were made to community partners facing severe financial pressure, using £375,000 of the organisations charitable reserves, helping to mitigate risks of closure and support continuing delivery (Mathers and others, 2020).

– The DevicesDotNow 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. A total of 2,419 devices were allocated to 203 community partners between 24th March and 31st July (DevicesDotNow, 2020a).

– The EY Foundation (2020) has been looking at the impact of COVID-19 on the future of young people from low income backgrounds and launched a new online support scheme.

– Lloyds Banking Group (2020) set up a Digital Helpline in partnership with the Silver Line and We Are Digital to help with tasks such as how to set up online banking as well as helping to access essential services such as food shopping or making GP appointments (see case study in Appendix 1).

Organisations have rapidly adapted to challenging circumstances

The changes in government guidance, health concerns, financial and staffing pressures because of the pandemic have caused enormous difficulty for organisations. However, our research showed a wide range of impressive responses that deserve recognition. We saw how awareness of the need for support led to huge enthusiasm to help and rapidly adjust systems. Figure 5 shows that most organisations who responded to our research were able to deliver services online (68%) or over the telephone (64%). 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%). Nearly two-thirds of organisations had phoned their existing service users to find out what kind of support they needed (59.9%).[14]
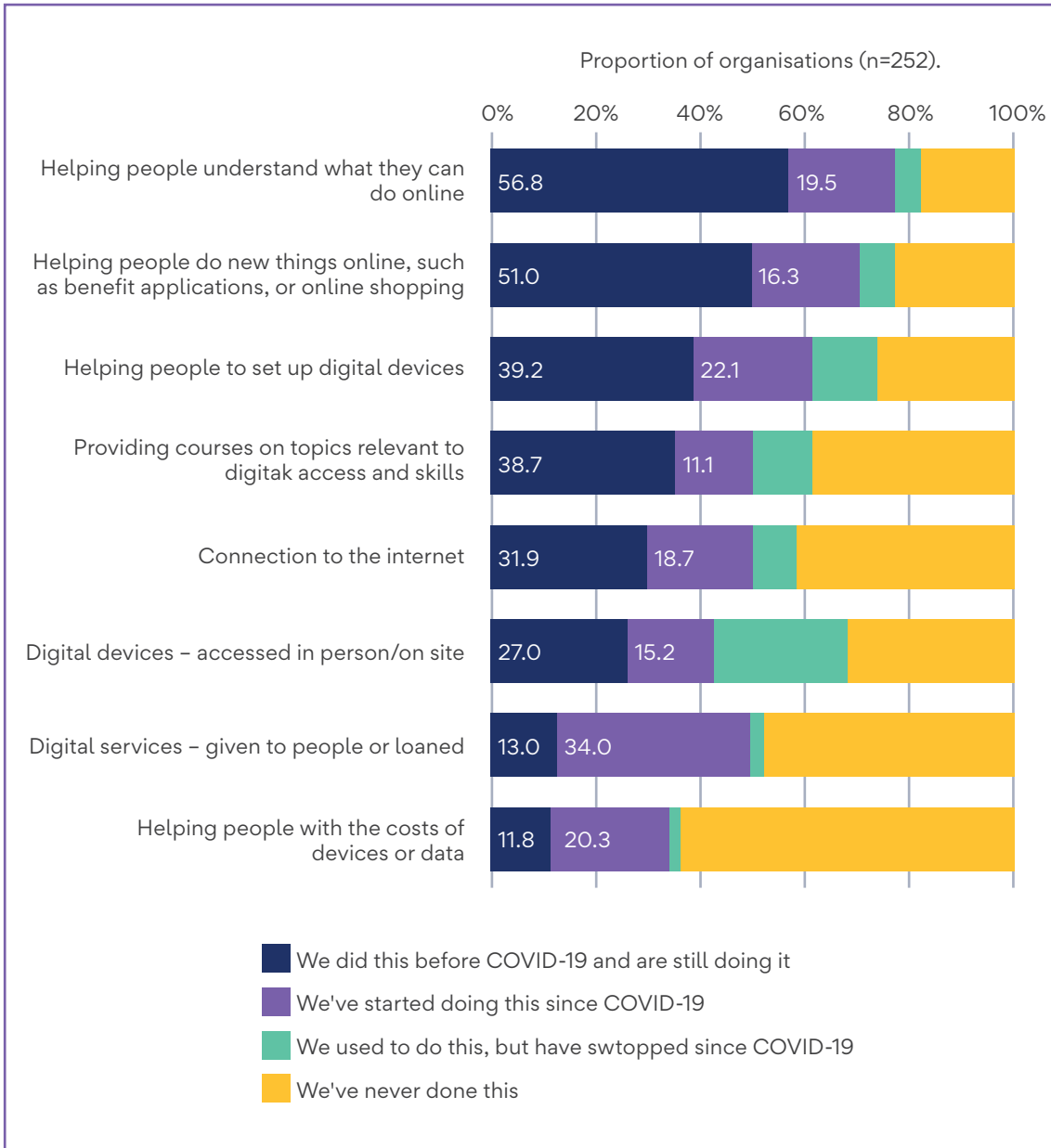
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[14]Unfortunately, we did not allow in this question for organisations to state that a change was not applicable. However, we know from comments that a proportion of organisations that did not make these changes did not do so because, for example, they did not have a venue to make COVID Secure.

Figure 5: How have you changed your service delivery because of COVID-19? Please tick all that apply (online survey of organisations)

Organisations have rapidly adapted in a variety of ways

Category	Percentage
Moved some/all services online rather than face-to-face	63.5%
Moved some/all services telephone rather than face-to-face	63.5%
Not been able to deliver some/all of our services because of restrictions	52.2%
Made our venue COVID secure	44.0%
Staff have been trained to deliver services remotely	42.9%
Staff have been given difital skills training for themselves	33.3%
Staff have been trained in how to help others with digital skills	32.1%
Not been able to deliver some/all of our services because of financial impacts	11.1%

Percentage of organisations responding that they have changed delivery in the way described (n=252)

In our online survey of organisations, respondents were more likely to report continuing support they had provided prior to the pandemic than to have started new support (Figure 6). Over two-thirds of organisations were helping people to do new things online such as benefit applications (67%). Nearly half of organisations were giving/loaning devices (47%), and just under two-thirds are helping people to set up new devices (61%). Though only 21% of organisations were providing funding for devices or data themselves, 42% would signpost to another organisation for this form of support (Figure 9).

Figure 6: How has COVID-19 affected your delivery of the following? (online survey of organisations).

Proportion of organisations (n=252).

Helping people understand what they can do online: 56.8, 19.5

Helping people do new things online, such as benefit applications, or online shopping: 51.0, 16.3

Helping people to set up digital devices: 39.2, 22.1

Providing courses on topics relevant to digitak access and skills: 38.7, 11.1

Connection to the internet: 31.9, 18.7

Digital devices – accessed in person/on site: 27.0, 15.2

Digital services – given to people or loaned: 13.0, 34.0

Helping people with the costs of devices or data: 11.8, 20.3

Legend:
- We did this before COVID-19 and are still doing it
- We've started doing this since COVID-19
- We used to do this, but have swtopped since COVID-19
- We've never done this

Giving/loaning devices is the form of digital support which has expanded the most with 34% of organisations started doing this since the pandemic. To a significant extent this will represent UK Online Centres that participated in the DevicesDotNow scheme (see Appendix B). But there has also been a new emphasis on this area for many organisations responding to the loss of/ limits on access to public computers in libraries and other community venues. Overall, more than one in eight organisations have started at least one new form of digital support.

Rising to the challenges of the COVID pandemic – how Dorset Council helped get people online

Dorset Council has been providing digital skills support since 2013. Before the pandemic it had 70 Digital Champions providing sessions and drop-ins in community settings, the majority in libraries. When the pandemic hit, all Digital Champion work in community venues halted and the council's staff moved to home working. Routes to Inclusion Project Officer, Lyndsey Trinder said, **"We immediately saw a big gap and knew people would need the help of our Digital Champions more than ever."**

The council rapidly set up a hotline with the Digital Champions who felt confident to provide remote support. It was operational by 30 March 2020 and by 16 March 2021, 866 people had been supported by the helpline.

The Dorset Digital hotline has been promoted in the local media, on social media and posters/postcards were distributed across the county via GP surgeries and parish councils. Bodies like the local Age UK partner and NHS now refer their users to the digital hotline and the council has received support from organisations like the Sight and Hearing team to give tailored support to people with specific needs.

The council also joined forces with the DevicesDotNow and Everyone Connected schemes to distribute devices to vulnerable people. The hotline and Digital Champion support for recipients was vital in helping them learn to use the device and then get online so they could be connected to their loved ones and vital services.

"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."

Lyndsey said the lockdown was the catalyst for getting many people online for the first time.

"I can remember the days when people said 'Oh no, I wouldn't be interested', and there's been a massive shift to 'Actually, I can see this is a real benefit for me and I need to know how to do it.'"

Impressively, 15% of organisations said they had started providing in-person access to devices, despite social distancing and other measures – thanks to efforts to make venues COVID-19-secure. When they were able to, some organisations provided support at a distance on doorsteps or in people's gardens.

"Many carers have been excluded due to not having a digital device or Wi-Fi at home... The centre has been made more COVID-secure with contactless signing in, hand sanitisers and signs to remind carers to wear masks and sanitise their hands, we also have enhanced daily cleaning in the centre and have restricted groups to 5 carers..."

Carers charity, North West (online survey of organisations)

The least likely form of support to have been started since the pandemic is courses – a series of sessions provided at fixed times to groups of learners. These are typically arranged with a large number of people in a single room, allowing. Half of organisations were providing these (39% continuing to do so and 11% starting to) we assume mainly online[15]. Online group sessions present challenges to learners and it is hard to replicate the benefits of face-to-face group sessions where people can easily socialise and work in smaller groups or pairs, for example.

"Before when there was a problem someone could informally drop into a session. But when you are running remotely it has to be scheduled... People aren't benefitting as much from those group sessions... There are so many benefits that come with attending a group session and it's a challenge enough getting somebody to do a video call one-to-one... A call with a group session can be quite daunting and somebody has to be quite far along their journey of learning to engage in that way..."

Sarah Parkes, Age UK project manager (case study interview)

Overall, the majority of respondents to our online survey of organisations reported they were providing digital support. For example, helping people who were struggling with access to digital devices (85%), with setting up and using new devices (84%), with connecting to the internet (83%) and the costs of devices and data (77%). Most commonly, organisations identified that people struggled with "Doing something new online" (87%).

This matches findings from other parts of our research and in the literature, regarding 'narrow' or 'limited' internet users (Ofcom, 2018b; Yates and others, 2015).

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[15]In at least one instance sessions were provided in COVID-secure venues, offering blended learning where people could join the session online if not in person.

"The older learners that we've helped but I've not spoken to for years... they kept my number and they've come back again [during the pandemic]. You know, they were starting on their digital journey – and then at this time they've all come back because there's too much they haven't been able to do... When they are on their own and having to actually do it for real, that's where the confidence issue comes in."

John Curtin, North Manchester Community Partnership (case study interview)

Many internet users are comfortable with what is familiar, but need help with new tasks, or with the fast-pace of change in digital devices and services – such as the circumstances of the pandemic. Some respondents to our phone poll of 50-70 year olds on lower incomes described only doing one thing online ("I only use WhatsApp as an alternative to texting").[16]

"I only use it for things that I pretty much understand such as emails or shopping. However, I am aware there are many finer points that I am not aware of and don't understand... My children are often amused at my ignorance and sometimes shocked at my lack of awareness of risky things such as phishing scams etc."

65-70 year old woman, South East (online survey of 50-70 year olds)

Organisations have had hugely varying experiences

There has been variations in the numbers of people coming forward for help. These variations are influenced by geography, demography and organisational type and history.

Organisations in places of higher deprivation and/or those with deep roots in communities have experienced greater demand.

In some other locations, there has been a reduction in people seeking support, which affects funding. 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. Where they've been able to, organisations have adapted their own working practices to use digital tools and streamline processes – but others have not had the time, funding or capacity to do this.

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[16]A common theme among internet users in our phone poll was reluctance to use online banking and shopping. Respondents said "I'm not confident in shopping on it," "I struggle to shop online. I don't know how to," and "I don't agree with shopping online," for example. Previously, the ONS (2020a) have found that, among people aged 55-64, 69% use Internet banking, compared to 79% who use email. Among people aged 65+ the difference is starker: only 49% use internet banking, compared to 72% who use email.

"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 skills and training provider, Yorkshire and the Humber, 300 staff, 20 volunteers

Areas with higher numbers of residents using English as an additional language have experienced particularly high demand (our online survey of organisations found 41% were supporting people with English as an additional language). Other research surveying migrant and refugee support organisations and community groups from across the UK, included digital exclusion as a core barrier to access to healthcare.

"Digital exclusion is particularly prevalent for migrants who are destitute, including many asylum seekers who are provided with only £37.50 a week from the government, and many more who receive no support and are prohibited from working. They have extremely limited funds to top up their phones or buy additional data."

Medact, Migrants Organise, and the New Economics Foundation, 2020

In short, we know that there are large numbers of migrants and asylum seekers who are living in deprivation and experience digital exclusion. For example, Wi-Fi is rarely provided in asylum accommodation, and language barriers are exacerbated by online and telephone formats – particularly automated phone systems, which do not offer alternative languages to English during triaging. We also know that people in these demographic groups are dying at higher rates from the virus (PHE, 2020), creating additional needs for support among family members and loved ones (see Appendix 1 case studies on Samafal and North Manchester Community Partnership for more).

Overwhelming demand for digital support in some areas

We heard from organisations about overwhelming levels of need for digital support that the pandemic, restrictions, and economic impact have created:

"We have had lots of people and organisations asking for free devices and free internet connection. We have done our best to accommodate, but we only have so much capacity."
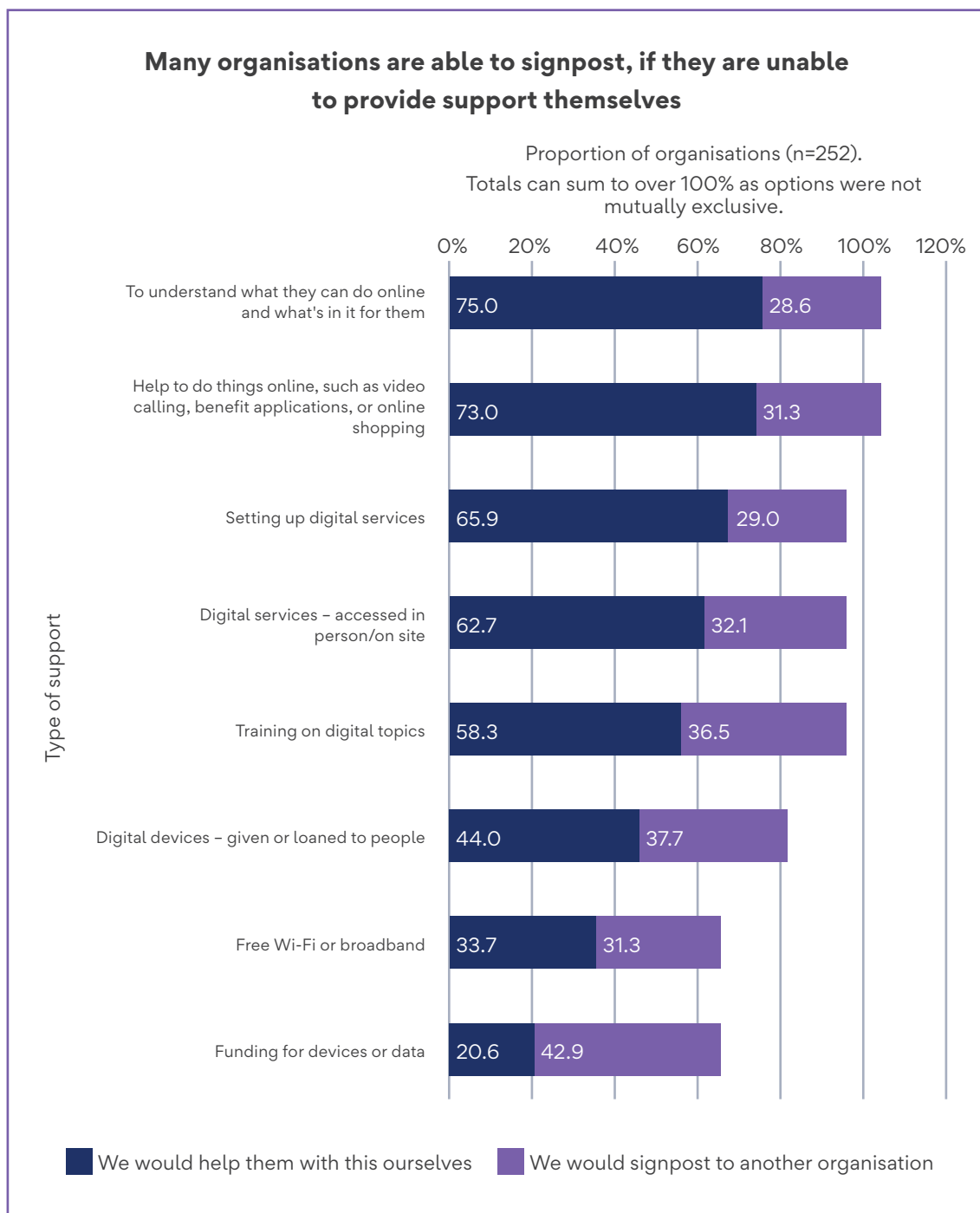
County Council, South West England, 5,000 employees (online survey of organisations)

"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 (case study interview)

An important way to overcome these issues is through signposting – which also enables organisations that do not provide digital support themselves to ensure digitally excluded people are supported. Over a quarter (at least 29%) of organisations were involved in signposting to other organisations for a variety of forms of digital support (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Direct digital support and signposting, proportion of organisations (online survey of organisations)

Many organisations are able to signpost, if they are unable to provide support themselves

Proportion of organisations (n=252).
Totals can sum to over 100% as options were not mutually exclusive.

Type of support	We would help them with this ourselves	We would signpost to another organisation
To understand what they can do online and what's in it for them	75.0	28.6
Help to do things online, such as video calling, benefit applications, or online shopping	73.0	31.3
Setting up digital services	65.9	29.0
Digital services – accessed in person/on site	62.7	32.1
Training on digital topics	58.3	36.5
Digital devices – given or loaned to people	44.0	37.7
Free Wi-Fi or broadband	33.7	31.3
Funding for devices or data	20.6	42.9

Rapidly scaling support to address overwhelming demand – Northfield Neighbourhood Network scheme (NNNS)

Northfield Community Partnership (NCP) is registered as a UK Online Centre. People in the community can use computers there and get digital skills training and support to complete online tasks, such as housing applications.

At the start of the COVID-19 crisis, NCP set up a dedicated emergency phone number for residents offering support with food parcels, prescription collection, housing/benefits advice, and friendly phone calls. NNNS contacted all 154 community assets, mapped at the start of the project in January 2020, to establish which were still operating. Only 18 of these were still offering some form of support to the local community. NNNS created a new emergency asset directory to advertise and support local businesses who offer food delivery and other services. 254 street champions were recruited to support residents on their street, with the added benefit of training from NCP.

As with other organisations, the major challenge for NCP was the rapid increase in the scale of support required.

"I would say for the first 12 weeks of lockdown, we were all working about 12-15 hour days... we were giving out about 1,000 food parcels a week... It was exhausting, but it was for a good outcome... I think we're all still tired."

"We've had lots of people lose their jobs, and some people's access to the internet was through work devices, so once they were made redundant [it] meant that they didn't have access to [a device] anymore. Or it might have been that they [have] a device, but they've had to cut costs... things like the internet or the Sky is quite often the first thing to go"

Lois Maguire, Northfield Community Partnership, Birmingham (in-depth interview – see full case study at Appendix 1)

Remote digital support takes longer and doesn't work for everyone

While there are benefits to adopting remote support methods, organisations have found it challenging to provide digital support in this way and many learners struggle. We found a number of limiting factors identified in the responses to our online survey of organisations:

– Establishing remote connections with clients that have low level tech skills is difficult

– Resolving problems remotely can take much longer, and

– Some issues are just too difficult to fix remotely

– Supporting disabled people is more difficult, particularly visually impaired people

– Learners can be more nervous about remote support

– Some volunteers are not comfortable with providing remote support

"Many people had no internet connected devices. Those that did were often unwilling to do lessons online or on the phone. Even those who were willing found it very hard to do online lessons. We tried Zoom but often failed to connect due to lack of basic skills and a common language"
Housing provider, North West

Limitations have also been noted in the literature: "digital versions of in-person library activities were not like-for-like replacements and did not deliver the same outcomes as the in-person offer" (Carnegie UK Trust, 2020: 3). The Charity Digital Skills report (Skills Platform/Zoe Amar Digital, 2020) found that while "Two thirds (66%) [of charities] are delivering all work remotely," 40% say their digital service delivery is poor, "27% have cancelled services because either their charity or their users don't have the necessary skills or tech," and 34% "see the fact that their audience is not online as their greatest challenge." These are issues that were also identified by respondents to our online survey of organisations.

"One-to-one IT support takes so much longer by phone and some of our service users have decided not to take this up."
Local organisation supporting older people, Yorkshire and the Humber (online survey of organisations)

"Being able to... sit down next to them with their computer in front of them, seeing what they see, being able to point to the screen, being able to use the mouse and keyboard for them – these made it very much easier than it is currently over the phone. I think from the learner's perspective it has been harder too - they don't feel as certain that what they are looking at is correct because you can't see it... ultimately, it takes much longer to teach during COVID and the learners will be left feeling less confident."
Local organisation supporting older people, South East (online survey of organisations)

"Many service users are not online or do not want to access services via digital. Digital is also limiting in terms of the benefits for many of our service users who prefer face to face contact and benefit from touch and peer interaction. It is one option for people but is still slightly dehumanising. It also doesn't work for everyone."
Charity working with older people, London – 9 staff, 450 volunteers (online survey of organisations)

For some organisations, it hasn't been possible to continue operating

The challenges of the pandemic have been enormous, and it should not be surprising that some organisations have not been able to continue providing digital support or, to fully adapt to providing new ways of support. We found that 64% of organisations were unable to provide some/all of their services because of restrictions – mostly the provision of access to digital devices in person or at a venue (Figure 8). Over a quarter of the respondents to our online survey of organisations reported they had enabled this before the pandemic but had to stop doing it as a result (26%). More than one in ten were unable to provide courses, or help people set up digital devices (12% and 11% respectively). Many organisations reported both learners and people providing support have found it more difficult to do this remotely. Helping someone with digital skills remotely takes longer – often much longer and means that less people can be supported by staff or volunteers (see section below).

A smaller but still significant minority of organisations were unable to even help people understand what they can do online (6%). We can assume this lower figure represents the proportion of organisations we surveyed that either shut down or were inexperienced with any form of digital support.

Figure 8: Proportion of organisations that stopped providing forms of digital support during the pandemic (online survey of organisations)

Some organisations have been unable to provide forms of digital support

Category	Value
Digital services – accessed in person/on site	26.2
Providing courses on topics relevant to digital access and skills	11.9
Helping people to set up digital devices	11.3
Helping people to do new things online, such as benefit applications, or online shopping	8.4
Connection to the internet	7.7
Helping people understand what they can do online	6.2
Digital services – given to people or loaned	1.7
Helping people with the costs of devices or data	0.8

Proportion of organisations (n=252).

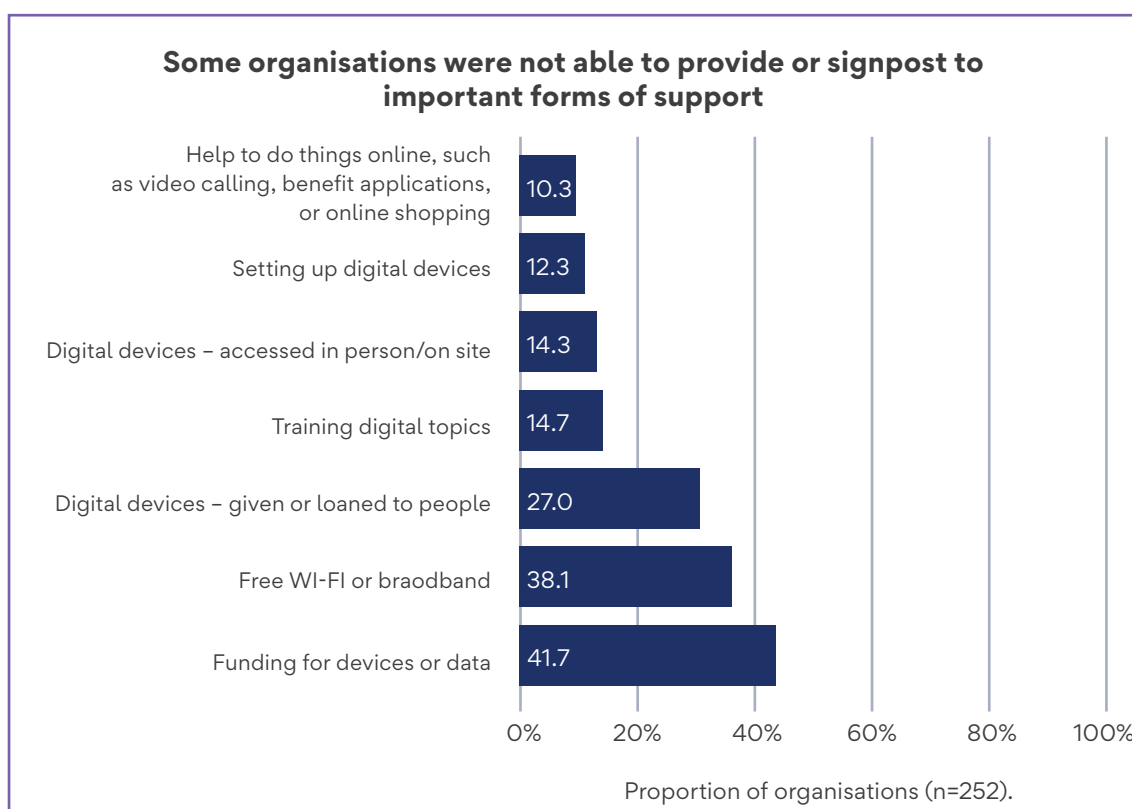"We are working in such a disadvantaged area that most do not have home devices or, the right programs to work remotely… digital skills groups have had to take a back seat while we concentrate on feeding people and dealing with their primary needs… our centre doesn't have large spaces so we can't social distance easily… It's been totally frustrating - we had just completed our new computer room ready for digital projects"

Church led community centre, East Midlands, 24 employees, 40 volunteer

During the pandemic, even organisations that have the capability to provide digital support haven't always had the capacity to do so because of the demand for other emergency support. For digitally excluded people, existing relationships with trusted organisations provide the interactions where triaging of digital support needs can occur. This emphasises the need for local networks of a diverse range of organisational types, able to signpost between each other – rather than there being a single type of organisation that is best placed to support people.

A proportion of organisations, including those for whom providing digital support during the pandemic would have been entirely new, could neither provide support themselves nor signpost to others (10%; Figure 9). Despite the publicity about need for devices and the DevicesDotNow scheme, over a quarter of organisations said they did not know of anywhere to refer people for devices (27%). The most significant issues were around data costs, with 38% unable to provide or refer to free Wi-Fi or broadband and 42% unable to provide or refer to sources of funding for either data or devices.

Figure 9: Proportion of organisations that could neither directly provide nor signpost to forms of digital support (online survey of organisations)

Some organisations were not able to provide or signpost to important forms of support

Help to do things online, such as video calling, benefit applications, or online shopping	10.3
Setting up digital devices	12.3
Digital devices – accessed in person/on site	14.3
Training digital topics	14.7
Digital devices – given or loaned to people	27.0
Free WI-FI or braodband	38.1
Funding for devices or data	41.7

Proportion of organisations (n=252).

What can organisations do to help digitally excluded people?

– **Research the needs of service-users, potential service-users and/or local residents.** Your organisation may not be reaching people who are digitally excluded through digital marketing, so contact people directly over the phone, use hard-copies and contact other organisations that may be working with similar target audiences (e.g. food banks).

– **Design digital services to meet digital accessibility guidelines** and consider inclusion from the start. The organisation Diversity and Ability have great guides on accessibility and meaningful digital support.

– **Offer remote support** for any digital services your organisation offers. Plan this from the start of designing a new service. Remote digital skills support and device set up support is essential when running a device scheme.

– **Set up device schemes.** Engage with (potential) recipients about device preference, as different demographic groups may prefer smartphones, tablets, or laptops. If you are lending devices, ensure you have an exit plan for recipients. This should include advice on purchasing devices and signposting for low-cost devices or help with costs.

– **Ensure all data is wiped from devices** and set up devices again if they are to be re-loaned. This will take time and/or involve payments to a third party, so ensure you build this into budgets and planning. EveryoneConnected provide introductory advice, and may be able to provide devices too.

– Device schemes could be based on second-hand devices – see the Reboot project's guide on refurbishing schemes.

– **Provide easy-to-read, hard-copy device guides** when providing a device to a service-user. These should cover: the basics of turning on, setting up, changing core settings (i.e. font size) and using some of the functionality of devices.

– **Design a referral process** to triage digital support for learners. Work with groups that may provide referrals to design this process.

Citizens Online can provide bespoke advice on each of the above.

Many digitally excluded people don't know where to get support

As noted above, a considerable number of organisations have not been able to provide digital support during the pandemic. Sadly, this has exacerbated a situation where many digitally excluded people do not know where to turn for

digital support. Our phone poll of 50-70 year olds on lower incomes found **only one in eight people (13%) were aware of a digital support organisation.** The overwhelming majority of people, whether on or offline, were not aware of an organisation that could provide digital support if they needed it (87%).[17] This is important as digital inclusion is not only about getting 'online'. Internet users can still lack skills or confidence and need digital support when encountering unfamiliar tasks (including even those who are generally confident). Confident internet users cannot signpost those they encounter who need support if they are unaware of organisations providing support.

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

Pat, East Sussex (case study interview)

"At work, if something doesn't work, you ring your IT guy? We can't do that…. If, for example, I got a laptop and a printer, and the printer didn't work, what would I do? I wouldn't have a clue!… Having somebody you could ring to go through [those sorts of things] with you, 'press this button, do that and that and that should reboot it' or whatever, that would be really helpful for people [like me]."

Margaret, Greater London (case study interview)

Of those who found organisations to get help, many referred to Google or YouTube. Others mentioned libraries, Citizens Advice, and specialist digital skills or local organisations. Some referred to companies providing devices, but these don't necessarily provide the type of support required.

"I'd try the organisation providing the service but some of them are pretty useless"

65-70 man, South West (online survey of 50-70 year olds)

Others were reluctant to engage with support, particularly remote support. This may not be a problem where individuals are able to access in-person support or are satisfied being offline. However, alternative routes often do not exist, particularly during the pandemic, and there is a risk that people fall into deeper exclusion because available support has not been tailored to their needs, or communication about it is unsuitable:

"It is no good if person who helps me is not beside me to explain things and take me through slowly at the pace that I am able to example one to one coaching/support/help with computer in front of us"

60-64 year-old woman, London (online survey of 50-70 year olds)

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[17]More recently, Lloyds (2021) report that 19% of their consumers who had not used the internet in the past three months wanted to but said they "don't know where [they] could get help."

"All of these [range of problems clients have with using the internet] have impacted on some residents not accessing our service - we get around this by having 'buddies' but many are reluctant 'to be a bother'"

Village hub, South West England, 14 volunteers (online survey of organisations)

The lack of awareness of organisations that could support people to get online or do more online is a significant factor in persistent digital exclusion. However, we found that many people who do not know where to get 'formal' support from an organisation regularly accessed 'informal' support from family members, friends, or colleagues during the pandemic.

Informal support from family and friends has been important

Around one in ten (11%) people in our phone poll of 50-70 year olds on lower incomes, said they had asked for help with accessing the internet or a digital device since the start of the pandemic. The majority received support from a friend, family member or neighbour (63%) and some were receiving support from colleagues (11%).[18]

Similar findings have been reported in other research. Lloyds (2021) report those aged 60-69 most frequently cite their family (69%) above most other means, when asked "What would be the easiest way for you to learn new digital skills." Support can also take the form of 'proxy' use. "Most people (60%) not using the internet at home have asked someone to do something for them online in the past year. Among these 'proxy users', the most common need was help in buying something (57%)." (Ofcom, 2021b).

More broadly, we call this type of support 'informal'. Although this type of support can help to reduce the harms associated with digital exclusion, it's not usually a sustainable solution. Support from friends, family and colleagues can mean that they do things online 'for' people instead of helping them develop skills, confidence and independence to do things online for themselves. Relationships can be affected by feelings of inadequacy and lack of motivation around digital technology, and potentially by resentment around requests for support.

However, we can also look at this as an opportunity; there are a huge number of people already providing some support to people without internet access or the skills and confidence to make the most of the internet.

These people can be offered training and access to resources to enable them to better support others. They could also be encouraged to refer on those they support to specialist services, who may be able to better develop independence or provide more sustainable assistance.

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[18]Of all respondents, the overwhelming majority said they knew of a family member, friend, or colleague they could call on for help (90%), a marked contrast to the few who knew of support organisations (13%).

The limitations of informal support and 'proxy' internet use – Margaret's story

Margaret worked as a civil servant but retired in the late 2000's because of ill-health. She had developed repetitive strain injury and could no longer use a keyboard. At work Margaret used a computer daily, however she now has difficulty with technology, commenting that, **"…because I spent a couple years out of the loop, I have had to relearn."**

Margaret said she had "definitely" used the internet more since the pandemic, using Google and Gov.uk to get up-to-date information, and also engaging with WhatsApp groups. But she has still relied on friends to use the internet on her behalf which is not ideal for her. She was wary of burdening people, so tries to spread her support requests among different people.

"I only have a smartphone and don't do online banking. There are some things I can do for myself and other things I can't. In those cases I have to ask family or friends… I will text my friend on WhatsApp and say, 'Can you order in this book for me'… She will pay for it, and then I ring up my bank and reimburse her…

I have ways of working around things… but it does mean drawing people in – you aren't independent… I've got used to it, but I don't like doing it. Because my son works, my friend works… I can imagine somebody texts 'can you order this kettle for me…?' and they'd say 'No – I'm busy working!' So it is not nice… it is not nice having to ask other people to do stuff for you."

Margaret, 64, Greater London (in-depth interview, read more in Appendix 1. Margaret is a pseudonym for our interviewee)

Learning for the future

Even with the announcement of the government's "roadmap out of the current lockdown for England," there are good reasons to believe that life – and digital support – after the pandemic will not resemble a simple 'return to normal'.

Even if face-to-face services can fully reopen, some organisations look set to continue offering remote support because of the benefits it can offer. Meanwhile, renewed attention on the problems caused by digital exclusion should lead to increased investment and support to ensure people have access to the devices, connectivity, data and support with digital skills they need to make the most of the internet.

The pandemic has highlighted the emotional and mental health benefits of being online

While most of those 50-70 year olds who were not online at the start of the pandemic have not moved online, those who have, are regularly enthusiastic about the opportunities and benefits that come from connecting online. Even for those who were online, the pandemic has prompted them to explore new parts of the online world, such as the peer-to-peer support available through communication tools. Margaret[19], who told us she had definitely been using the internet more since the pandemic, highlighted the value of a WhatsApp group for disabled people:

"[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 (case study interview)

For others, support from organisations has been critical to increased internet use, and people we spoke to expressed considerable gratitude for this support. Consistent with other research from before the pandemic (e.g. Lloyds Bank, 2019; Education Policy Institute, 2017; Royal Society for Public Health, 2017)

[19]Not her real name

but particularly significant during it, we have found that internet use can reduce feelings of isolation, open up opportunities, and benefit mental health:

"I didn't use [the internet] as much [before the pandemic] 'cos I didn't need to go online to do my shopping, and things like that… Thanks to you and your colleagues I've been able to do it more than I did before… It's a fantastic freedom… it's helped with life – keeps your life going instead of just sitting stagnating while this virus ruins the world. You can go out and see the world as it was or as it could be…"

Michael, 64, Brighton (case study interview)

Support has often been around socialising – in the pandemic context where doing this online has become essential for social participation and emotional and mental wellbeing:

"I've had local choirs, jazz bands and community groups… having to move online, but the people in the group don't have the skills in order to remain active… [people who were] quite happy in their own ways, engaged with their communities in ways which worked for them, which were predominantly offline… [It] might just be that for them their only social interaction was attending the local choir rehearsal… Being able to engage with that remotely is so important, [and depends on] having access to technology and the skills to enable them to do that."

Sarah Parkes, Age UK (case study interview)

Digital-by-default excludes people, including from essential financial support

We encourage efforts to communicate the benefits of being online and ensure there everyone has access to digital support.

However, it's important to recognise that many people simply do not want to use the internet. This should be a valid option, and be catered for. Government, public and community services and businesses must remember their responsibility to those who are not online. Offline forms of access, at least via telephone, should be available for people without digital skills, devices or access.

During the pandemic, the increasingly 'digital-by-default' nature of public services and wider society has been dramatically extended. At the same time, face-to-face access to goods, services, support and social connection has often not been available. Hence, both those who choose not to use the internet and people who are otherwise digitally excluded have faced deeper exclusion during the pandemic.

> "They might not want to use the internet 'cause they don't find it useful but they experience the negative consequences of not doing so."

Older people's organisation, South East England, 8 employees, 60 volunteers (online survey of organisations)

The pandemic has increased the number of people looking for work or unemployment benefits and the Department for Work and Pensions' portal for claiming and managing Universal Credit (UC) benefit is 'Digital by Default'.[20] 60% of organisations we surveyed were supporting people aged 50-59, including with UC.[21]

> "Now there is an increased demand for work-based digital skills support, so we are getting a younger demographic who need work skills where people have been made redundant and they haven't necessarily needed digital skills before. Or they are having to work from home but don't necessarily have the skills to work in that way..."

Sarah Parkes, Age UK project manager (case study interview)

> "People who've lost their jobs are having to register for Universal Credit for the first time, and it's not just making a claim – they've got to log in every week, and remember passwords."

John Curtin, North Manchester Community Partnership (case study interview)

> "We've had some absolutely heart-breaking stories come through where people have not been able to – [or] have been terrified of not being able to – complete their Universal Credit return... update forms that they have to put in [online] and being terrified of being sanctioned because of that."

Katie Knight, Digital Brighton & Hove (case study interview)

During the current pandemic, a vicious cycle of people who are not online facing difficulties accessing financial support, while people on low incomes face barriers getting online, has now been exacerbated:

> "It is the long term of cost and set up of internet that is the main barrier."

Local organisation for older people, North West England, 5 employees, 80-90 volunteers (online survey of organisations)

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[20]As Citizens Advice notes, people can apply for Universal Credit over the phone or arrange for someone to visit them at home in a limited set of circumstances, but these exemptions are neither widely known nor used. In practice, a claimant must be online to apply for and receive any benefit. Government initially introduced guidance that claimants "will not get a sanction if you cannot keep to your Claimant Commitment because of coronavirus (COVID-19)," but this softening of the approach ended in Summer 2020 (Pring, 2020).

[21]These were the three largest demographic groups identified other than "people living alone or feeling isolated" at 71% (matching the targeting of our online survey of organisations, but also indicative of the role of age in digital exclusion). Smaller proportions were supporting people experiencing poor mental health (59%), Disabled people (52%), people receiving income-related benefits (45%), people with English as an Additional Language (41%), people living in rural areas (40%), carers (40%), Black, Asian or people from other minority ethnic backgrounds (33%), and parents with school-aged children (32%).

"We are in a disadvantaged community where many people have problems surviving with food and home expenses let alone internet and digital technology."

Church-led community centre, East Midlands, 24 employees (online survey of organisations)

Most 50-70 year-olds are online. They don't always need help, but they can provide it

Significant numbers of people are digitally excluded and need support. However, the most recently available data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020a), shows that among people aged 50-69, three-quarters are daily internet users (74%), and a further 17% use the internet at least weekly. We found that even among 50-70 year olds on lower household incomes (under £25,000), 70% were internet users before the pandemic.

A number of respondents to our online survey of 50-70 year-olds expressed pride in their abilities, and a level of irritation with the perceived assumption that the research project was treating people in the demographic as being routinely digitally excluded:

"I live my life online, bank, shop, get info, news, Twitter, Facebook, MumsNet etc. I have helped run a website and Facebook group for years and meet clients online. I appreciate there are some who don't use the internet but we are 60 and 65 and feel it's wrong to assume everyone in our age group is incapable"

60-64 year old woman, Yorkshire and the Humber (online survey of 50-70 year olds)

"As someone who is from the generation that developed the internet and brought computing into everyday use in every home and in people's pockets I am highly skilled and experienced in computing and in internet use. I find it rather patronising and insulting that people in their 50's and 60's are considered as computer illiterate."

50-54 year old woman, South West (online survey of 50-70 year olds)

"Some local organisations like housing associations have started approaching all older people as clients and 'vulnerable' which is mighty annoying and also means people are becoming wary of intrusive patronage... We've found far more people want to give than to receive help and this has led to discussions on how older people are perceived and how to shift that"

Residents Association, London, 8 staff, 40 volunteers (online survey of organisations)

Future work must recognise not only that many 50-70 year olds are confident internet users, but also incorporate this into the design of peer-to-peer support for people facing digital exclusion. These confident and experienced users are often the ideal people to be digital champions and support others.

"In all honesty, I am the friend/neighbour that people turn to for help with IT. I've been able to help many of my older neighbours over the years, including during COVID lockdowns"

65-70 year-old woman, South East (online survey of 50-70 year olds)

Organisations need more support to provide help with digital skills

During the pandemic, some organisations mentioned that they found they were able to support more people due to improved referral systems and extra funding.

"We received some extra funding due to digital inclusion being highlighted as a bigger issue, or more immediate issue. It means we can loan more equipment and give out more funding"

Council, East of England, 500 staff, 30 volunteers

However, this has been far from universal. For many organisations, providing support has become much more difficult, and funding has often been negatively affected. More than one in ten organisations have already been forced to stop delivery of some or all services because of financial impact (11.1%, Figure 5, online survey of organisations). We can expect that this will increase as the economic pressures continue and emergency funding runs out.

"I do not think there has been any improvement from the pandemic circumstances. I feel it has brought nothing but difficulty in helping people with technology. However, I think the social isolation has increased the number of people wanting help, which is good, but it is harder to help them."

Local organisation focused on helping people aged 50+, South East, 10 staff, 5 volunteers

The challenges faced by charities that may be providing support have previously been highlighted in an All-party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration (2020) report into social connection, which notes that "The financial vulnerability of many civil society organisations [and...] the current crisis poses a severe test to many of these organisations. They have had to change the way that they work, often with extra demands on resources. Sources of funding for small charities – sponsorship, pub quizzes and raffles – can no longer take place." Even where there hasn't been a financial impact, organisations told us about the cost and work involved in moving systems and services online – and the need to recruit and/or train new staff or volunteers in order to do this, and to meet higher levels or demand and lower levels of capacity associated with remote support:

"Moving everything [online] was a lot of work, especially helping people to understand what it is... The format itself is not challenging, but... many of our volunteers in particular remain very wary, so we have recruited dedicated online volunteers"

Charity supporting disabled people, South East, 30 staff, 50 volunteers

For at least a third of organisations, adaptation has relied on training of staff (see Figure 5 above). A third of organisations reported staff had been trained in helping others with digital skills (32%). There is an apparent shortfall (25 percentage points) between organisations that moved services online (68%) and those that trained staff in remote delivery (43%). It may be the

case that staff were capable and did not need training, or that organisations did not have the capacity for or awareness/funding to cover external training. As remote delivery is new for most organisations, we might expect that there will be considerable variation in the quality of remote delivery and training. The learning process is still very much underway, and many organisations would benefit from training around digital transformation, staff development, and making remote support meaningful and effective.

There is a sizeable minority of people who lack devices and data, but a much larger group that needs support building their confidence with new online tasks. **Provision of any devices to people who have never used the internet must be accompanied by wrap-around support, which needs sustained funding.** Investment must include training for digital champions to provide meaningful remote digital support and effective, personally-tailored learning.

Our research finds a clear need for **continued and expanded support for organisations.** Embedding digital provision, and supporting organisations to develop networks that can triage, signpost and provide digital support in local areas is critical.

People in crisis during the pandemic need digital support – and more

One prompt for staff development and training comes via the number of organisations providing digital support who told us that, since the pandemic they have more regularly been supporting people who have been in crisis – and need more than digital support alone. This includes people who would normally be in touch with drug and alcohol services, mental health services and immigration or housing issues – accessing these services less often or not at all due to shifts to remote/online service delivery. This has created challenges for those providing digital support who haven't had experience supporting people in crisis situations:

"[They] do have a digital inclusion need, but it's amongst lots of other things... There's a lot of skill in supporting people in a way which is supportive for their other needs but remains focused on the digital championing work which our digital champions are trained to do... That's really difficult, particularly [over] the phone. If you call somebody for a session and they're in tears because they're worried that they're going to be evicted next week and you're there to talk about their tablet... that's a real, real challenge."

Katie Knight, Digital Brighton & Hove – case study interview

Though government restrictions will ease, and the immediate pressures of the pandemic begin to lift, we can expect that organisations will be encountering higher numbers of people in crisis situations in the near future due to the longer-term economic, social, and mental health impacts of the pandemic.

Identifying people who are reluctant or struggling to engage with the internet, and providing them with the right type of support to help them benefit from access and skills development, is difficult. It requires partnership working at local levels to build triaging and referral networks. It is small, local organisations with trusted relationships that are best placed to reach digitally excluded populations. People with digital support needs can be identified when accessing other forms of support.

At the same time, those supporting digitally excluded people with varied needs must be able to sensitively signpost to other services when needed. The problem of digital exclusion has not been resolved during the pandemic, and sustained financial and operational support for organisations promoting digital inclusion continues to be needed.

Remote support has benefits beyond its role in the pandemic

Many community venues had already closed or reduced their opening hours prior to the pandemic due to public sector cuts or a more competitive funding landscape. Offering remote support, often at more convenient times for learners, has the potential to reach new audiences, and potentially more people in need. For those 50-70 year-olds lacking confidence, picking up a phone may feel less daunting than admitting vulnerabilities face-to-face in a public place.

Many organisations highlighted the benefits of video calls over face-to-face meetings, including for service users. With appropriate support, these delivery methods can be explored by those who have not yet done so, or who had initially poor experiences. Remote support has reduced the time spent travelling to clients and/or enabled people to join meetings who previously would have struggled for reasons of cost, disability, or lack of affordable transport options.

"What has been a real revelation is the need for virtual delivery for the more isolated individuals. We are coping with this due to COVID but there are people out there who are isolated due to illness, disability or the remoteness of where they live. We have realised that there is so much more we can do to help these people."

Local employment support organisation, South East England, 15 employees, 2 volunteers

"Our online support has had surprisingly high take-up and, as it covers the whole county, is accessible and affordable to deliver. We might not have had capacity or demand in one location previously."

County library service, West Midlands, 200 employees, 110 volunteers

"We have found that some therapies work really well online… Offering online sessions means that family members from different parts of the country can join in. I don't think we will go back to travelling so much to attend meetings."

NHS Foundation Trust, London, ~3,000 employees

"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, 5 employees, 2 volunteers

Age UK and others emphasised the value of paper-based supporting resources that mirror the instructions delivered by Digital Champions. This is important when assisting a learner over the phone as then both the learner and the Digital Champion are referring to the same documents. When you can't see a learner's screen you can't be sure you are referring to the same thing.

"Those printed out resources …aid independent learning and recapping of activities in between sessions. So in the same way that somebody might take notes in a face-to-face session, us being able to send out these instruction guides or how to guides means that someone can refer to them independently on an ongoing basis."

Sarah Parkes, Age UK (case study interview)

Marketing digital support needs improvement and resourcing

Remote support may enable greater reach, but even during the pandemic, there has been a lack of awareness amongst 50-70 year olds about where they could find digital skills support. Existing marketing needs improvement, not only to reach digitally excluded people and others who would benefit from digital support, but to avoid alienating them and their peers. These peers are well-placed, either to refer people to organisations providing support or to provide it themselves – ideally as trained digital champions, to overcome the issues with informal support discussed above. The process of improving marketing requires funding and resourcing.

We found promising examples of innovative and responsive marketing practices through our research. Nearly two-thirds of organisations had phoned their existing service users to find out what support they needed (59.9%, Figure 10). Around one in five had conducted an online survey of their local population (18.3%) and two in five had contacted other groups to establish needs (41.3%).

Figure 10: During the pandemic, how have you assessed the needs of the people you support? Please tick all that apply. (online survey of organisations)

Organisations have made efforts to better understand their (potential) service users' needs during the pandemic

Category	Percentage
We support whoever approaches us	83.7%
We already have a good understanding of which groups or areas might be most at risk	64.7%
We've contacted existing service users by phone	59.9%
We've contacted other groups	41.3%
Other	40.9%
We've done an online survey of our local population	18.3%

Proportion of organisations (n=252).

A number of organisations highlighted the importance of paper-based marketing materials. Ageless Thanet advertised their digital support offer (and promoted digital champion volunteering) in their Age Friendly local business directory, delivered in hard-copy form to 8,000 households.

There is a need to rethink marketing of digital inclusion support, placing greater emphasis on direct paper-based marketing, including through other support channels such as food banks. The hooks in marketing materials need to be carefully considered and based on evidence from local learners and communities about what is engaging. Communications must avoid alienating people through casual assumptions about people aged 50-70 and about the reasons why people might need digital support.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the restrictions accompanying it, have caused major challenges in all parts of society. Using the internet has been a lifeline to many during a time of social distancing, closed community venues, and guidance to stay at home, shield or self-isolate. We already knew that people aged 50-70 were among those who have expanded their internet use, but this research emphasises that not everyone in the age group was online before the pandemic. Those who were online were not confident with the new digital tasks they were expected to undertake, such as ordering groceries or applying for benefits. **While the majority of people aged 50-70 are internet users, there is also a significant digital divide, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic.**

Some people aged 50-70 were completely offline and didn't have devices. Some lost access to devices when furloughed, or when public spaces closed. Others could no longer afford the internet when made redundant.

Many of those needing digital support could ask friends, family, neighbours or colleagues, but unfortunately not everyone can rely on these networks. People who were socially isolated before, or because of the pandemic, **often not only lacked informal support networks, but did not know where to find support from organisations.** They've experienced exclusion from many of the benefits of the internet during this time.

Fortunately, there are many different types of organisations, some newly formed during the pandemic, that have continued or started to provide support for digitally excluded people. Despite a rapidly changing situation, device loan schemes and resources have been quickly developed thanks to the commitment and compassion of staff and volunteers, keenly aware of the risks of digital exclusion in their communities.

Some organisations have found ways of working that they intend to continue with after the pandemic. People who previously were unable or did not want to attend venues are now able to receive **support over the phone.** People living far from community venues in rural areas, and people with caring responsibilities, **can arrange digital support at a time that suits them** rather than experiencing the frustration of being unable to attend a once a week drop-in.

These changes to providing digital support have been difficult. For some organisations, it hasn't been possible to continue operating. Many organisations reported that both learners and people providing support have found it more difficult – indeed, even seeming "impossible" at times. Helping people remotely takes longer, and this means fewer people can be supported by a given number of staff or volunteers.

An important task for organisations providing digital support is to engage with people providing informal digital support to loved ones. Raising awareness of specialist services that encourage independent learning and provide more sustainable assistance is important, so learners can be referred by their friends and family. Some friends and family members will also be interested in receiving digital champion training and access to resources, even in volunteering for organisations, to help them support others.

Small, local organisations are best placed to reach digitally excluded populations but are often financially stretched and have little budget for marketing and capacity for their own digital skills development, let alone supporting service users. It's not enough to provide devices alone: organisations need to be able to provide recipients with wrap-around digital skills support. Sustained funding and well-publicised access to resources are necessary.

Above all, funding and support organisations, as well as policy-makers, must recognise that this is a critical moment for digital inclusion. **The problem of digital exclusion had not gone away before the pandemic, and it has not been solved during it.** The pace of change and ever-increasing demands on people to engage digitally with the world mean there is a persistent need for support. Right now there is a heightened level of awareness of digital exclusion and the need to tackle it. **This moment needs to be seized.**

Table of figures

Appendix 1: Case studies

A case study of the value of support from Ageless Thanet

"It was just amazing, and I was thrilled to see them"

Profile

Valerie lives in Minnis Bay, Birchington with no family living nearby. Valerie was confident sending emails, but new technology such as Zoom, and online shopping and banking was daunting.

Digital support during the pandemic

Valerie attended the first Ageless Thanet IT skills session, which sadly had to be postponed as a result of lockdown. However, this first session was enough for Valerie to get confident enough to use Zoom. Valerie was then able to attend more sessions online and is enjoying being able to video call her family.

"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' 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."

Learning and positive experiences during the pandemic

"I managed in December to finally contact my brother who currently lives in New Zealand. Since I last saw him four years ago, I have only been able to contact him on the telephone which can be very expensive for long conversations. However, since joining the IT sessions, I have now been able to set up and create a meeting on Zoom, and it was so nice to see my brother and communicate face-to-face albeit virtually for the first time in so long. With the world currently going through the COVID-19 pandemic now it just makes it that extra bit special that I can see he is ok and doing well and vice versa. My niece who lives in North Yorkshire also managed to join the same call and again it was just amazing and I was thrilled to see them, something I could not imagine ever being able to achieve."

AGELESS THANET, KENT

"Digital inclusion has become our number one issue, for both of our volunteers and our participants."

Profile

Ageless Thanet is a programme to help people aged 50 and over, in Thanet on the south east coast of Kent. It's an area of high deprivation. As of November 2020, 7.2% of Thanet residents aged 50 and over are receiving out-of-work Universal Credit or Jobseekers Allowance, compared to 4.1% of residents in the South East region as a whole.[22]

Ageless Thanet is led by Social Enterprise Kent, and works in partnership with Citizens Advice Thanet. We spoke with Rebecca Smith, Deputy CEO of Social Enterprise Kent.

Ageless Thanet aims to improve the lives of people over 50 by reducing loneliness and social isolation, and improving mental and physical wellbeing. It offers a range of support such as:

– Life Planning Service: money advice, accessing benefits

– Wellbeing: providing six to eight week activities to improve people's wellbeing

– Age Friendly Business Scheme

– Active Citizenship: volunteering and supporting the community, including a pre-covid digital inclusion offer

Digital support during the pandemic

Pre-pandemic, Ageless Thanet ran drop-in sessions in local cafes and other venues, where people could bring a digital device to get support with setting it up and using it. There were also sessions of peer-to-peer support where older people ran and delivered digital support to other people in their age group. Prior to the pandemic, however, digital had not been a priority:

"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 'now 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'...or 'my children or my grandchildren or my partner or somebody else would always help me with this kind of stuff but that I'm not allowed to see them at the moment"

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[22] Office of National Statistics

Thanet has been badly affected by COVID-19. Most of the volunteering activity Ageless Thanet has been involved in has been delivering food and prescriptions to vulnerable people. As well as meeting practical needs, this has also been an important way of "people having a sense of connection... that spirit of community. People just kind of banded together and really supported each other when they were really needing it."

Ageless Thanet have moved a lot of their usual activities online. Networking sessions for Age Friendly Businesses moved to Zoom, as did zumba, pilates and other classes. Weekly quizzes also moved online.

They've also recently moved from signposting to other organisations to help with devices, to receiving tablets to give out to learners – and also applying to fund devices and internet access for volunteers as well.

Since March 2020, Ageless Thanet volunteers have recorded over 990 hours of support. Life Planners associated with the programme have helped clients maximise their income, with a combined financial benefit of over £220,000.

Some activities were able to continue when restrictions were relaxed – such as 'social strolls' along the seafront. But while the organisation made its own venue 'COVID Secure', they then found venue bookings for digital drop-ins and other activities had to be cancelled in other venues due to the restrictions. As an organisation primarily concerned with the emotional and mental wellbeing of people aged 50 and over, they saw the pressures of the pandemic very clearly. While the organisation has adapted successfully and continued to provide a huge amount of support, it hasn't been easy:

"I've got to be honest... this has been one of the most difficult and challenging years of my career. The hardest thing I think was the fact that while a lot of our over 50 residents are online, for those who aren't the gap is so great between not being online and being online... Everything has taken so much longer to do."

The challenge has not just been about supporting the service users the organisation would normally interact with, but staff and volunteer adaptation. The organisation has 115 volunteers, and a lot of the processes for recruitment and induction had been manual, and paper-based. Switching to Google Docs and automating some processes (following training from the Centre for Acceleration of Social Technologies) has improved things, but only for those people who are digitally included. Before the pandemic, only three of the volunteers were focused on support with digital, but the organisation has recently recruited another 14.

Volunteers who had been helping people face-to-face found that the transactional digital skills people were now asking for help with – Universal Credit applications, booking online shopping delivery slots and GP appointments – were new to them as well as the learners.

Learning and positive experiences during the pandemic

The programme runs a discount scheme for older people with an 'Ageless Thanet Card'. In order to reach digitally excluded people two mailouts were sent, at the height of the pandemic in Spring 2020 and in the summer, which asked how the recipients were feeling and if they needed support to get online or with a device they had but didn't know how to use.

When sending out a new booklet direct to card holders in Autumn 2020, this again included a section for people feeling 'nervous about technology,' asking if people would like to get help from a digital volunteer – or to become one!

Where digital inclusion had been understood as important prior to the pandemic, it had been 'on the periphery' of Ageless Thanet's activities, but is 'part of our core now', with Social Enterprise Kent recruiting a new Digital Inclusion Manager.

"I'm so, so proud of how our staff have had to pivot and change and adapt what we do to keep supporting our 50 plus residents with the internet. Because, you know, we could have just said, 'It's too hard to deliver all of this kind of stuff online or to change what we do.

But [instead] we said, 'We know there are 9,000 people that still need our support. They still need us.'

There are people who are lonely and isolated in Thanet, more so now than ever. So we thought outside the box in order to be able to continue delivering it. My staff have really gone above and beyond the call of duty to help the people that we are supporting."

For more information:

agelessthanet.org.uk | facebook.com/AgelessThanet | twitter.com/AgelessThanet

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AGE UK

"Being adaptable and flexible enough to move our model to a remote support approach has meant that we've continued to deliver really vital support to older people at a time when they need us the most."

Profile

Age UK is the UK's largest charity dedicated to helping everyone make the most of later life. They provide companionship, advice and support for the older people who need it most. Funding received nationally is distributed through a network of over 130 local Age UK partners, including for localised digital inclusion programmes.

This case study is based on an interview with Sarah Parkes. Sarah is a project manager in the Well-being Team, which aims to tackle loneliness, get older people active, and support them to stay independent for longer. Sarah specifically manages programmes for older people relating to digital inclusion.

Before the pandemic

Age UK has a long history of delivering digital inclusion activities – through the One Digital and, more recently, Think Digital programmes – by providing grant funding to their local partners who then recruit and train digital champions. Digital champions deliver awareness-raising events and activities, as well as direct digital support for older people. This support would normally be delivered face-to-face in one-to-one or group sessions. Age UK have also run tablet loan schemes under both programmes, making technology available to older people who might not otherwise have access.

Age UK's data has highlighted that the older people they reach are among those most at risk of digital exclusion, and most in need of support:

– over 50% **have some disability or were housebound**

– over 40% **have one or more long term health conditions, and**

– over 50% **live alone.**

Digital support during the pandemic

As a result of the pandemic, some activities initially had to stop due to barriers faced by some older people with getting online. Prior to the pandemic, some older people had access to devices and connectivity through community technology provision, such as libraries or local Age UK venues, or through friends and family. Some older people didn't have the means to purchase their own devices or connectivity, or the confidence to warrant the financial commitment.

"Whereas before this hasn't necessarily been an issue – and they've quite happily continued being offline – it's now increasingly important."

In the pandemic, people were pushed to go online to carry out the same tasks that they had pre-pandemic, such as GP appointments, as well as more everyday activities:

"One couple went out for breakfast every week to the same place... The café had to put in digital processes and breakfast had to be ordered via an app. This couple didn't have the digital skills [o]r a device to order their breakfast in this way... they're not able to place an order until they learn these new digital skills."

Ordinarily, many older people in the community would not approach Age UK for help with digital skills. But with many activities moving online, many felt a push:

"I've had local choirs, jazz bands and community groups... having to move online, but people in the group don't have the skills in order to remain active... [It] might just be that for them their only social interaction was attending the local choir rehearsal... As soon as that is taken away, it can actually have such a huge impact on somebody. Being able to engage with [groups] remotely is so important, [but it depends on] having access to technology and the skills to enable them to do that."

The demographic of people seeking support has shifted since the pandemic, with people aged 50-60 coming forward more often. This has influenced the type of support provided:

"We are supporting people with very different activities... [For example] there is an increased demand for work-based digital skills support... We are getting a younger demographic... where people have been made redundant and they haven't necessarily needed digital skills before. Or they are having to work from home... Those people wouldn't necessarily have classed themselves as older and needing support from an organisation like Age UK."

Challenges during the pandemic

While it is clear that there are many people who need support, promoting the benefits of digital and the services Age UK delivers has proven challenging. Previously, marketing was often through awareness-raising events, or posters displayed in local cafés, libraries and churches. Referral routes from other activities were also affected when venues closed and their activities stopped or moved online. To overcome this, local Age UK partners relied heavily on targeted leaflet distribution to households. Age UK's social media campaigns have also been focused on reaching the friends, families and carers of older people, rather than the older people directly.

Sarah stressed that, while demand has increased, it is also important to recognise the impact of the pandemic on support capacity. It is taking longer to help each individual as it is more intensive, and it is harder to work in groups. Where service users have little to no digital skills, remote sessions are predominantly delivered one-to-one:

"This means people don't benefit from the social element and the peer support of group sessions... Before, when there was a problem, someone could informally drop into a session. But when you are running remotely, [support]has to be scheduled... It's a challenge enough getting somebody to do a video call one-to-one... A call with a group session can be quite daunting, and somebody has to be quite far along their journey of learning to engage in that way."

Delivering support remotely has also led to a dip in confidence for digital champions themselves, related to a need for a more advanced or different digital skillset. Ultimately, this has resulted in a change in the skills and training required for digital champions, and has meant that some existing volunteers have opted not to continue support remotely.

"Before we would have said you don't need to be an IT whizz… now there is more of a priority on somebody having the sufficient level of digital skills themselves."

Meeting the demand for support isn't easily resolved by recruiting more volunteer digital champions, as this creates work for staff to recruit, manage, train and monitor them:

"There's a lot of work that goes on… in order to initially assess older people, get them assigned to the right volunteer, make sure they've got enough technology for everybody… It's not as easy as just getting more volunteers on board."

Learning and positive experiences during the pandemic

Age UK were able to implement new models and processes quickly and effectively, which meant that, while they lost some digital champions, new volunteers came forward due to the benefits of the remote model – people who "aren't confident to deliver face-to-face activity, or aren't able to, which has been a real positive."

The five Age UK local partners involved in the Think Digital programme recruited and trained 59 digital champions between June and November 2020, and while that number was lower than anticipated pre-pandemic, their capacity was greater.

Age UK have worked with their partners to include a digital assessment/ diagnostic tool in their wider processes to assess need. Ensuring there is a focus on digital has increased internal referrals. Age UK are considering moving forward with a hybrid approach incorporating "both remote and face-to-face support because, despite challenges, we have identified a lot of benefits."

One of the key learnings Age UK will retain is the provision of supporting resources. They learned from feedback the importance of providing older people with a printed resource that recaps the instructions delivered by the digital champion:

"Those printed resources… aid independent learning and recapping of activities in between sessions. In the same way that somebody might take notes in a face-to-face session… [they can] refer to these guides independently on an ongoing basis."

Age UK intend to continue developing these resources both online and offline to support not only older people but also digital champions, friends, families and carers.

For more information:

AgeUK website | Facebook | Twitter | Connecting digitally – coronavirus advice page

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Michael, 64 – Brighton & Hove

"If anyone needs to get out and do things, do it on a computer. It's a fantastic freedom."

Michael is retired and lives with his four dogs. He enjoys model making and before the pandemic, he used to go to a nursing home to teach the residents to make and paint models.

"I used to spend more time chatting than anything else…It gave them a chance to talk and relive their lives and tell their stories."

Michael used to use computers during his work roles- but when he retired, he did not have access to a computer. About 2 years ago he began using the internet via a smartphone, but this was very challenging due to the size of the screen and his eyesight.

"With my age, my eyesight is not that good anyway and the phone screen wasn't that helpful."

When the pandemic hit, a neighbour used to do some shopping for Michael. He wanted to do more for himself online but couldn't afford a device.

"Being retired and disabled…, money was a bit tight – so buying a computer [was not possible]."

As he was clinically vulnerable and shielding, he received a letter from Brighton & Hove City Council that listed available support. Michael called the Digital Brighton & Hove Support Line. Michael said he would not have known where to go for digital support until he received the letter, although he has had some ad-hoc informal digital support from someone who was working at the food bank.

Michael now has a laptop through the Digital Brighton & Hove and TechTakeBack refurbishment scheme. He also receives occasional support from a Digital Champion. Michael is now doing his food shopping for himself – which has helped him to be more independent. He also does online shopping on behalf of his neighbours (and his dogs!). Michael also uses technology to accessing health and medication information on the NHS website and monitor his heart rate.

Being online has helped Michael to pursue his interests. He's been looking up wildlife, natural history, photographs from a space station, playing a snooker game and finding details for his model making:

"It's been very helpful getting online to do my shopping and has also helped with the model making...I'm building a kit, I can get a reference from actual World War Two history sites and things like that."

Michael has identified that the learning he is doing is helping through this time:

"As I got older, I wanted to learn how to do something properly... It is very helpful... If I need to find out what a tablet does, I get online and Google it and find out what it is. ... I've sort of gone backwards... I'm learning now as a pensioner basically."

He is also sharing his skills with others online by setting up his own website helping other people to make models:

"I used to take kits [to care homes]... [Being online]'s the only way to do it nowadays... To help people who need help with modelling, to keep them healthy, to help them get into modelling and how to do things. It's a way of giving back what I've learnt."

Michael told us that being online has had a positive impact on his life in terms of confidence and social connection. Even though unable to go outside, Michael has found a freedom in being online:

"Thanks to you and your colleagues I've been able to get out and do it more than I did before, so just to say if anyone needs to get out and do things, do it on a computer. It's a fantastic freedom... It's helped with life, you know, keeps your life going instead of just sitting stagnating while this virus ruins the world, you can go out and see the world as it was or as it could be... That's how I feel since I done it."

Michael also hopes that sharing his experience of being online will inspire other people to get online:

"I hope so, there's no need to sit indoors by yourself, you know, talk to people, do it, you know. While you can't see them or touch them, you can talk to them, you can learn from them, you k now. You learn from life, or their life. It's a life sharing experience, there's no need to be alone. If you've got a computer, or a tablet, get out there, share your life"

Michael was part of the Digital Brighton & Hove tablet loan scheme before he was allocated a permanent laptop through TechTakeBack. He continues to receive occasional support from a Digital Champion.

The changing skillsets of digital champions: Digital Brighton & Hove

Digital Brighton and Hove (DBH) was founded in 2015 and has built a strong cross-sector partnership focussed on tackling digital exclusion across the city. The project is managed by a team of Citizens Online staff. The project trains and supports Digital Champions (DCs) who support individuals to get online and/or to develop their digital skills.

The pandemic forced a shift in demand in the amount of people who needed access to digital services immediately, often in crisis situations. Digital Brighton & Hove coordinated the 'digital workstream' of the city council's COVID-19 Vulnerable People Cell. They hosted monthly online network meetings, weekly breakfast Zoom sessions on variety of topics and hosted a resource directory on their website.

Working closely with community partners and service users it became clear that devices and internet connections were needed for people on low incomes and/or who were shielding. The organisation was swamped with requests for access to a smartphone, tablet or laptop from both local service users and organisations. DBH were successful in immediate applications for emergency funding from Good Things Foundation, DevicesDotNow and Sussex Community Foundation, to set up a tablet loan scheme.

In collaboration with Jangala, Justlife and Diverse and Ability, DBH launched a targeted pilot to enable Wi-Fi, tablets and trusted digital support to vulnerable people in emergency accommodation. With Tech-TakeBack, DBH helped redistribute repurposed second-hand devices to families on low income to enable schooling and home working. Through close collaboration with the Tech for Good Brighton community, DBH worked to ensure community organisations were able to find peer support through the help of over 40 local tech volunteers. During the first national lockdown period, over 20 one-to-one virtual matches were facilitated between local community organisations needing digital support and a further 47 community organisations were helped so they could continue to provide support to residents.

As a result of the pandemic,

"There's been a reduction in the number of public places that people can go to access free Wi-Fi, such as libraries, and people are unable to use that. They're reluctant to set up a Wi-Fi network in their own homes because they don't understand how that happens [and] don't understand the cost implications."

On top of this, the key problem for DBH has been the scale of support needed, and the ways remote support impacts on capacity.

"Our Digital Champions are now having to support people with setting up their tablets and turning on their tablet, charging their tablet and describing all of these things over the phone, which takes a huge amount of patience and creativity and really advanced listening skills... And there's times when it can seem impossible for them..."

Providing support over the phone to learners has been frustrating for Digital Champions. Katie gave the example of a learner who had received a tablet, but hadn't been able to connect to the Wi-Fi – because the password was showing as incorrect over and over again, despite the DC's efforts. In the end, the DC decided there must be a problem with the equipment – but after picking up the device found there was no issue, and that instead the problem was that the learner had been inputting the passcode that would be used to access the tablet itself. Because DCs would never ask a learner – for direct security reasons and to encourage learners never to share passwords – and because the DC could not see what the learner was doing, it had been really difficult to identify this problem. Ultimately the problem was resolved, and the learner and DC were able to move on – but this illustrates how working remotely can make support much more time consuming, and the greater risks of learners being dissuaded.

Due to changes in support needs and what organisations can offer, digital champions have been supporting a different mix of people.

"With all of our referral services, we're seeing issues... they're not able to support their clients in the way that they normally would... a lot of employment services who are no longer able to meet with their clients one-to-one at this point... to fill out CVs and do training online... We've had some absolutely heart-breaking stories come through where people have not been able to – [or]have been terrified of not being able to – complete their Universal Credit return... update forms that they have to put in [online] and being terrified of being sanctioned because of that."

In short, the DCs have not just had to adapt to providing remote support, but have much more often been dealing with more people who have been in crisis – people with very complex situations and lots of unmet needs, who wouldn't previously have been looking for digital support. This would include people who would normally be in touch with drug and alcohol services, mental health services, or with immigration or housing issues.

"If you call somebody for a session and they're in tears because they're worried that they're going to be evicted next week and you're there to talk about their tablet... that's a real, real, challenge."

Digital Brighton and Hove is a shining example of the power of community to tackle problems together. The DBH digital inclusion network that has been built over five years was vital in enabling a fast response during the pandemic to community needs. In addition, the network is a fantastic place to share best practice, providing support for people with learning disabilities for example.

"Services who really weren't thinking about their digital strategy are now really engaging with that…There's been a lot of sharing information over the pandemic… you can do a huge amount with very little you if you're creative and push!"

For more information:

digitalbrightonandhove.org.uk | twitter.com/DigiBTN_Hove | facebook.com/DigitalBrightonAndHove

Doreen, 65, Essex

"To think, just three lessons ago, I knew nothing'"

Profile

Doreen had just moved into her retirement property when COVID-19 struck. She had no prior experience with technology at all and was a complete novice.

"I was fearful of pressing the wrong button and making mistakes. When my grandchildren had showed me things, it was at such speed, I was left confused."

Her previous town had provided plenty of entertainment and friends, but the pandemic exacerbated feelings of isolation in a new community of older people.

Benefits of digital support during the pandemic

During the pandemic, Doreen's daughter gave her an old Apple tablet. Having received a letter from Lloyds, Doreen telephoned the We Are Digital helpline to book herself onto training. After three training sessions, Doreen now does banking online.

"I visit my account every other day so I'm very comfortable with that now. I carefully wrote everything down so I could refer to the steps if I needed to as I like to see things in front of me. At the weekend I'm going to learn how to transfer money from one account to another."

Patient support from a Digital Champion has been key to building Doreen's confidence:

"The trainer had patience and kept pace with me, not hurrying me and she was very understanding when I pressed the wrong buttons. I also wanted to do shopping online, so We Are Digital helped me set up an account and I had my first delivery on Monday. My daughter joked saying there was bound to

be something wrong with the order, but the order was exactly as it should be, and it turned up on time. It was good to get the grounding and confidence."

Doreen realises there is so much available to her even in lockdown:

"To think, just three lessons ago, I knew nothing! Now I'm going to see if the church is holding remote services, look at online quizzes and Scrabble and see if there's a virtual art group I can join. I'm going to get other housebound residents online so they can meet remotely for chats."

Dorne, 72

"I really can't thank whoever provided this phone enough because from the moment they gave it, it really changed my life and it brought me out of depression... You couldn't give anyone a better gift, you really couldn't."

Profile

Dorne, 72, has four grandchildren. She retired early in her late 40s due to a heart illness, having worked in factories and shops all her life. Before the pandemic, Dorne liked to spend time in the park with her grandchildren (aged 6 to 16). During the pandemic, she was asked to shield and she has only left her house for a few appointments with a nurse, related to having COPD (Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease). The Northfield Neighbourhood Network provided her with a weekly delivery of essential food items, and later a hot meal every week. In October, following a conversation with someone delivering the food about missing her grandchildren, she was given a smartphone through the Northfield Neighbourhood Network Scheme. Dorne was delighted with the phone and the contact it enabled with her family.

Challenges during the pandemic

 "Since the pandemic, I've just been staying in. [My granddaughter] Charlie's in my bubble. She comes and visits me a lot and does a lot of my carrying and fetching and things 'cause I can't go out. This phone that they gave me is absolutely brilliant 'cos I can FaceTime the children, keep in contact with my daughter. It's absolutely changed my life. Best thing could have happened to me – and I was a computer idiot, didn't know how to use a thing!"

Before receiving a device and support, Dorne was "feeling really down and depressed – I really was." She feels the smartphone has made a big improvement to her mood.

"I didn't realise how depressed I was…. It was just me and the cat, and then when the cat got killed on the road, it was just me… I was on my own, couldn't talk to anybody. I just felt like crying all the while to be honest…"

Digital support during the pandemic

Thanks to the Northfield Neighbourhood Network Scheme, Dorne received a brand new Google Pixel 2 XL, with a SIM card and data. The data has since been used, but she has able to arrange for monthly data packs, finding it to be affordable to cover her usage.

The Google Pixel 2 XL has a large screen which Dorne can see easily. This – together with patient support from her granddaughter and her boyfriend – were key to her being able to benefit from the device.

"I found it very difficult at first – wasn't getting things right, and was pressing the wrong things, but [my granddaughter] was very good. She'd sit there and say, 'generally you can't do no damage, you can soon put it right again.' So I wasn't nervous - if I'd done it wrong, she'd right it. And I was doing that one finger typing, which ain't very good [laughs]. But I'm alright now, it's just practice – 'Practice makes perfect'… I must admit I'm quite chuffed with myself – I'm getting quite good now. She's proud of me!"

Dorne now uses Facebook to keep in touch with family, as well as Snapchat ("I talk to the 10-year-old that way") and WhatsApp. She also uses the device for crosswords and 'what's your brain age' games. The phone has also been used for Skype appointments with her doctor.

"I absolutely love it now. I can't live without it. I even play games on it…. I really love using WhatsApp, I do. You can contact friends all over the place and you can ring someone on WhatsApp and the cost is not like having a phone – I couldn't do that [before], I'd be saying 'Oh, I can't stay on long because of my minutes'… I didn't even understand what data was [but it means] it's cheaper than using the phone. Now I can just talk away!"

The device was particularly important to Dorne during a hospital stay and over Christmas. As she has COPD and a heart illness, her family were worried about her getting COVID-19. She was delighted to be able to use Facetime to video-call her family and reassure them, "When they could see me it was really nice."

"We did unwrapping the presents and it was as good as being there. It was absolutely amazing! It would have been a very sad, sad time otherwise, I hate to think about it…. On the birthdays, it's absolutely fantastic. It's like being there in the little kids' party with them – it's good. No, I'm amazed with technology. I love it."

Digital Dorset

Rising to the challenges of the COVID pandemic – how Dorset Council helped get people online

Dorset Council has been providing digital skills support since 2013. Before the pandemic it had 70 Digital Champions providing sessions and drop-ins sessions in community settings, the majority in libraries.

The council also leads on digital inclusion projects, including a pilot with the local NHS Clinical Commissioning Group to offer digital pregnancy services and Bourne Digital, a project to train unemployed and underemployed people in digital skills.

As part of Digital Dorset, the council works with partners to make the most of innovative technology, address connectivity and provide a wide range of forms of digital support.

We spoke to Dorset Council's Lyndsey Trinder to find out how the Digital Hotline rose to the challenge of the COVID pandemic.

Digital support during the pandemic

When the pandemic hit, all Digital Champion work in community venues halted and the council's staff moved to home working. Dorset Council acted fast. Within a week of the first day of the first lockdown, the Dorset Digital Hotline was born (it was operational by the 30th of March). The hotline has not only helped people with their digital skills, but it has also provided advice on broadband and online services.

Lyndsey said, "We immediately saw a big gap and knew people would need the help of our Digital Champions more than ever."

Nearly a year later, the hotline had helped nearly 900 people (there were 866 calls by 16th March 2021). Enquiries have ranged from getting online and using a device for the first time to pleas on how to get better broadband while working from home and remote learning.

The council also joined forces with the DevicesDotNow and Everyone Connected schemes to get devices out to some of our most vulnerable members in the community. The hotline and Digital Champions' support to these people was vital in helping them learn to use the device and then get online so they could be connected to their loved ones and vital services.

Lyndsey said the lockdown was the catalyst for getting many people online for the first time.

"I can remember the days when people said, 'Oh no, I wouldn't be interested', and there's been a massive shift to 'Actually, I can see this is a real benefit for me and I need to know how to do it.'"

How the hotline works

The Digital Hotline is open Monday to Friday between 10am and 12 noon daily. An answer machine service operates outside those times. A triage team from the council's library service answers the calls and refers them to the most appropriate Digital Champion. Lyndsey explained:

"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."

The digital help provided by the hotline benefitted from support across the Dorset community. It was regularly highlighted in COVID-19 Response meetings, with attendees from the public and voluntary organisations, and the council has also joined forces with other organisations to promote the hotline. The Dorset Digital Hotline has been promoted in the local media, on social media and posters and postcards distributed were across the county via GP surgeries and parish councils.

Bodies like the local Age UK partner and NHS now refer their users to the digital hotline, and the council has received support from organisations like the Sight and Hearing team to give tailored support to people with specific needs.

Overcoming the challenges

The Digital Hotline proved to be a life saver for many but there were many challenges the Digital Champions had to face.

Showing someone how to do something on a device is much easier when you can sit with them and show them what to do in real time. Explaining over a phone is challenging – even more so if you are helping people who might also be visually or hearing impaired.

Occasionally a Digital Champion has offered to collect a device and set something up on behalf of a caller. The council has also worked with organisations like Age UK and the Sight and Hearing team to help its callers. Lyndsey reflected:

"It is a real challenge to be able to help people when we're trying to do it all remotely and especially for those people who we were giving devices to – most of whom had never owned one. One woman said it wasn't for her and sent it back and another said she is managing, but couldn't wait until the libraries opened because she wants to be shown how to use it in a way that really would suit her much better. But we have had many success stories as

well, including a profoundly deaf man who has been able to communicate with friends via WhatsApp for the first time in nearly a year after he was given a smart phone."

For more information:

dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/your-council/digital-dorset | facebook.com/ digitaldorset20 | twitter.com/digitaldorset

John, aged 63

Profile

John, aged 63, lives with his daughter – one of his two children – in Kendal, Lancashire, where he has lived most of his life. Before the pandemic John was a taxi driver. He also worked as a self-employed plumber from the time he left school until the year 2000. Since the pandemic he has been claiming Universal Credit and has seen his income fall from around £16,000/year to around £400 a month. He described himself as "quite fortunate" however as he didn't have a mortgage. Nonetheless, with gas, electric and other living costs, his low income was a factor in limited digital engagement.

Before the pandemic

John had a smartphone, but no other devices. He could work out Facebook, and browse for things using Google, but relies on his two children (28 and 33). Before the pandemic, a neighbour also helped with transaction tasks, such as online shopping and booking holidays. His son had helped him with his initial application for Universal Credit.

Benefits of digital support/internet access during the pandemic

During the pandemic, John found that the internet was not much of a replacement for the activities he would like to have been engaging in were it not for the pandemic.

"I like going out for a drink with friends. I like going to Benidorm, over to Whitby for weekends, like Goth weekends and Pirate Festival. I mean, those sorts of things are the kind of things. It's just not really possible to replace online, is it? You can't go to a festival, you know."

John's motivation to explore the internet was tempered by his caution around scams – based on stories he had heard from TV programmes covering "romance scams."

"To be honest, I'm a little bit cautious about the internet – it can be, if you're not careful, a dangerous place, you know? Obviously it's a great help and a great tool, you know, but... a lot of people being scammed, you know. Certainly for my age you know, you've just got to keep an eye on things."

However, in October 2020, John contacted Age UK South Lakeland as he needed to be able to access online learning as part of maintaining his Universal Credit claim. A local firm was offering jobs but required people to do an online course before being considered. He didn't have appropriate technology to do so, and could not afford a new device himself.

The local Job Centre referred John to Age UK South Lakeland, who provided a tablet and internet access via their tablet loan scheme together with "How To" guides for initial support. He was new to online learning but had support from his children to help get him started. Unfortunately, by the time the tablet had been arranged the online course had finished. However, since he has had the tablet, he finds completing his Universal Credit journal easier. "I press a button and it puts my details in, can put password in, then takes to journal, that side of its dead easy – that's a doddle."

He is hoping that a tablet may be useful as part of future self-employed work, and as he needed the tablet to work on his CV and look for work, the loan was extended. This has also enabled support with ongoing training needs while other internet access points, such as libraries and Citizens Advice offices, remain closed.

Lloyds Banking Group – online banking and digital support

Profile

Lloyds Banking Group is a financial services group focused on Retail and Commercial Banking customers. The group includes 13 brands, with a total of around 30 million customers and 65,000 employees. It is one of the largest companies in the UK by share value; a FTSE 100 company. Lloyds Bank, one brand in the group, is one of the oldest banks in the UK, with roots in Taylors and Lloyds founded in 1765. Lloyds Banking Group has been working on digital skills and inclusion since 2015.

Before the pandemic

The Group's involvement in digital inclusion has three key strands:

1. Lloyds Banking Group has 20,000 Digital Champions who each pledge to use their digital skills to help people and / or organisations with their digital skills each year.

2. More formalised training is available via the <u>Lloyds Bank Academy</u>, created in 2018. This is a face-to-face and online offer providing interactivity and networking, with a core curriculum based on the Essential Digital Skills (EDS) framework. The Academy, which is free to use, is available for any individual, business or charity to use.

3. Every year, Lloyds Banking Group publishes the <u>Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index</u> – the UK's largest study of transactional, behavioural and attitudinal research and the Business Digital Index. These combines Lloyds Banking Group's own data for one million UK consumers with survey work with customers and of the UK public through IpsosMORI. The Consumer Digital Index highlights for example that two million households (4% of UK adults) do not have access to any form of internet-accessible device and that 6.8m UK adults – 12% - cannot connect to Wi-Fi by themselves. The same number are unable to change a password. In 2020, Lloyds Bank's <u>Transformation With Tech report</u> found that almost half of businesses stated they would have ceased trading as a result of the pandemic without digital technology, with Sole Traders being the most effected. (see Appendix 2 for more).

Digital support during the pandemic

Prior to the lockdown, there were no significant differences in online banking registrations across the same time period between 2019 and 2020. However, from 16th March 2020, the volumes of people aged 40 and over registering for digital banking significantly increased on those of 2019. Those aged 50 and over made up 61% of those who had registered for online banking January-April 2020 – compared to 44% for the same period in 2019.

Due to the pandemic, Lloyds Banking Group moved quickly to set up a brand new phone-based service, in partnership with We Are Digital, to support those who needed to learn digital skills to navigate the new circumstances. Launched on the 16 April 2020 – initially as a six-week pilot – the helpline has supported over 11,000 callers to learn new digital skills, at the time of writing. The Group has also provided over 1,300 devices and data through the helpline for customers who would have been unable to access vital services without them.

During the lockdowns Lloyds Bank, Halifax and Bank of Scotland made wellbeing phone calls, checking on customers aged 70 and over. As part of these calls, customers would be provided with the number for the Digital Helpline. Lloyds Banking Group also approached over 500 charities through their partnerships as well as the Lloyds Foundation to ensure that the Digital Helpline service was offered to those who would benefit from it most. For example, working in partnership with Action Deafness, they opened up a sign language video calling option.

They also supported the DevicesDotNow scheme (see Appendix 2). During the first national lockdown, Lloyds Banking Group supported the programme which delivered 11,500 devices to vulnerable and shielding adults during the first COVID-19 lockdown.

Challenges during the pandemic

The largest challenge was related to adapting to phone support around the increased need for online banking. Stephen Gray, Responsible Transformation Manager for Lloyds Banking Group, explained why the bank needed to adapt so quickly:

"Lloyds Banking Group telephony colleagues provide support with setting up online banking, but this is the first time we have supported with such a wide range of digital skills over the phone – and to such a wide range of users a well. As people were unable to travel to their branch or shops during the lockdown periods, learning how to bank and shop from home was essential."

Crucially, Lloyds Banking Group focuses on giving learners the skills and knowledge they need to stay safe online when engaging with platforms that are new to them – like Zoom or Internet Banking.

The Lloyds Bank Academy had to adapt from providing face-to-face digital support to virtual sessions, but was able to support over 1,900 people across 87 webinars. However the face-to-face sessions were good for the attendees to network and share their experiences and learning, which can be more difficult in a virtual environment. This is why the Academy has tried to replicate networking sessions by taking these online and making them regionally-focussed, so that small businesses can still network and discuss ideas with like-minded organisations. Stephen continued to explain some of the challenges they faced in launching the service so quickly:

"The hardest part of adapting was the speed at which we needed to change, build and launch new initiatives. Following the launch, because it happened so quickly, creating awareness of the service was difficult in the early stages as it can take time for new products or services to be communicated out to those who need them. We are very proud of all the work we have achieved to support customers and vulnerable people throughout the pandemic. Creating a brand-new service that managed to support over 8,000 people that might never have been able to get that support otherwise is particularly inspiring."

Learning and positive experiences during the pandemic

The Digital Helpline will be continuing into the next year and Lloyds Banking Group have used their learning from 2020 to try and adapt the service to be even more impactful by focusing on particular groups of people they feel they can best support.

The growth of unique users accessing the Lloyds Bank Academy has increased by over 750% in the last year. This increase in users provides a great platform for us to continue to grow in this area. New platforms and functionality that have been used to support the Academy webinars have encouraged Lloyds Banking Group to consider how to best deliver support and help for peoples' needs in the future.

For more information:

To understand more about how you or your family and friends can improve their own digital skills you can visit the Lloyds Bank Academy.

Margaret,* 64 – Sidcup, Greater London. Digital Exclusion based on disability

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"If you can't use a computer, if you don't have access for whatever reason, you've become a non-person in society. If you're saying, "online only," you're just excluding people."

Margaret worked as a civil servant but retired in the late 2000s because of ill-heath. She had developed repetitive strain injury and could no longer use a keyboard. At work, Margaret used a computer daily, but now she has difficulty with technology, commenting that, "...because I spent a couple years out of the loop, I have had to relearn."

At work, she used speech-recognition software (Dragon NaturallySpeaking) but at the time found that it wasn't very effective. She is pleased that smartphones enable her to use voice dictation ("it has been a life saver for me"). Although Margaret finds the software more intelligent, she still finds it limited.

"I can't do anything that needs downloading – a form or anything that needs filling in just gets too difficult. Systems are supposed to be set up with disabled people in mind – but they aren't, it's an afterthought... it's always after the effect that they try and tweak it... a lot of people bank with my bank because it still has a phoneline"

Before the pandemic

Margaret had adopted a hybrid form of internet use. She would look things up on the internet but buy items over the phone. She expressed frustration that in more and more cases there was no option to purchase items over the phone – with online becoming the only option. When attempting to move house in 2013, estate agents told her they couldn't deal with her without an email address. The only way able to move was "to rope my son in." She had a Pay-As-You-Go mobile phone contract and didn't feel the need for more internet access, "I really don't need it – I can get round most things, but you do come across things where you do have to rope people in." In January, she had bought a Smart TV.

Internet use during the pandemic: increasing – but still involving proxy use, and informal support

Margaret said she had "definitely" used the internet more since the pandemic – using Google and Gov.uk to get up to date information, and engaging with WhatsApp groups. But she has still relied on friends to use the internet on her behalf, which is not ideal for her. Margaret was wary of burdening people, so she tries to spread her support requests among different people. She described one particular friend she would often call on for this sort of help:

"I will text my friend on WhatsApp and say 'Can you order in this book for me'... she will pay for it, and then I ring up my bank and reimburse her. That's another thing I can't do – and I wouldn't actually want to do – online banking. So, I have ways of working around things... but it does mean drawing people in – you aren't independent.... and I would say I've got used to it, but I don't like doing it...it's not nice having to ask other people to do stuff for you."

Margaret's need for support is compounded by the lack of instructions with devices, such as the Smart TV her son installed just prior to lockdown:

"If you've bought a mobile phone recently, you'll know that there aren't any instructions. Ten years ago, you'd get a little leaflet in a box. Now you don't even get that – you're supposed to work it out yourself. And again, it's the same with smart TVs: 'Work it out yourself. We're not telling you - go to our website!'"

Margaret expressed a reluctance about receiving digital support in her local library (somewhere she is otherwise happy to visit when restrictions allow), because of the privacy implications regarding the information needed to fill in the forms she would otherwise struggle with. Margaret's preference is for support over the phone – including with regard to issues that arise with devices.

"At work, if something doesn't work, you ring your IT guy. We can't do that. If, for example, I got a laptop and a printer, and the printer didn't work, what would I do? I wouldn't have a clue!"

Margaret has said she had definitely been using the internet more since the pandemic and highlighted the value of a WhatsApp group for disabled people, which she came across via a political party she is a member of.

"[The WhatsApp group] was a lifesaver, because everybody... on that group has some experience of something or other... They have been really, really helpful... If you have a problem, you put it out there, somebody has the answer. 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 similar and somebody will give you the answer. I do it all the time – I'll give the answers to people as well!"

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*Margaret is a pseudonym. The person interviewed wished to remain anonymous.

Maria, 70 Minchinhampton, Gloucestershire

"I loathe them, absolutely hate them – if there is a mistake that you can make on a computer, I will make it… I can delete anything… I can save things but I can't find them… I'm never confident – I'm a complete computerphobe"

Maria has been married for 46 years and has two children. She worked for an engineering company for 40 years, before retiring in 2012. Maria's work-life involved providing technical support for instruments involved in the analysis and purification of water. However, she has struggled with computers since their introduction at university and work:

"I hated [computers] when I was at university… very long ago and we had to use punch cards… once I thought I was going to get expelled – because if there was something that you could do wrong, I would do it … [And] when we computerised [at work] it was a nightmare – I could do nothing for myself, I was alright using a programme if it was set up for me and they showed me…"

Maria was using an iPad for a variety of things before the pandemic, including games like solitaire and sudoku. But even with the iPad she had low confidence in her own abilities:

"Before the pandemic, I did use email, did use WhatsApp, and I would use Facetime – mainly to talk to my children… but I have to tell you that my iPad was set up by my daughter and my phone was set up by my daughter because I have no idea how to set up either an iPad or a smartphone – I have now managed to add apps – I had to add Zoom and a had to add Teams. I'm not very proficient…"

Benefits of internet access during the pandemic

Despite Maria's low confidence in her digital abilities, she has been able to use digital devices and do more using the internet during the pandemic. She has started using the BBC News app and Google for information about the virus and government responses, and video-calls have been important for her to maintain social connection. She joined a Zoom meeting for her grandson's birthday and uses Skype twice a week to reduce the sense of isolation of a friend in Wales during lockdown.

"It's mainly for my church things, and also for my exercise. Both thing which are exceptionally important… I'm a regular church goer, I've been practically all my life and they've gone online. They do it through Facebook. I have got a Facebook account which my daughter set up for me… I use YouTube – and I like YouTube – I can use YouTube, it's on my television, I do an in-depth bible study on there – that has gone online… I do 10 hours of exercise a week – I use Zoom for that. I managed to get on that because instructor sent a link."

The experiences have not been without negatives ("I always have this fear that I'm in the wrong meeting… You feel much more remote and you don't feel part of it – and you have to be muted – I don't feel the connection") and yet - through the experience of using the internet more during the pandemic, Maria expects to use it more in future:

"My exercise classes are wonderful – she's going to continue after the pandemic – because she's offering so many more classes because she doesn't have to travel to halls – she only needs 15 minutes change over time… [and] I will continue to do a lot of classes online – because I can do so many more classes – and I can have a cup of tea in between and it's just great. I love it."

Internet use: from informal support to independence?

The problems that Maria has encountered are around the way accounts, devices, and cloud-computing work:

"I have a Google account and there's lots of things that are attached to that Google account and I never know which account they're talking about – whether it's my Apple ID or my Google account on my Samsung account… I have rung up – got myself into an awful muddle – in some way locking myself out of the Samsung account [associated with the phone], which was quite difficult – there were things I had to be able to get into to be able to do things. I talked to one person and I was absolutely almost in tears. And then I talked to a nice lady and she talked me through it, but quite often I will get my husband to talk to them. I will give him permission… because I hate it."

As well as relying on her husband for support with aspects of internet use and when problems arise, Maria is happy to learn from her children. However, she is concerned about her lack of independence:

"I've taught my kids an awful lot and I say, 'It's your turn now'… If anything happens to [my husband] well, [my daughter] will have to take over. Because he does all the internet banking. He sets up all the things that are done on the internet, everything, all the other standing orders, all the paperless bills… I do absolutely nothing that way, and [my daughter] would have to do… and if anything happens to [her] then I will go back to paper bills because I would not be happy."

However, since the pandemic, Maria is progressing to be able to solve problems she encounters herself – through videos:

"The biggest problem I have is people can talk to me [over the phone] – and I have no idea – sometimes the way they describe it is not there. What my daughter has taught me has to go onto YouTube and there you get a video… It shows me the things that will come up – and it'll show you which things to click."

West Chesterton Mutual Aid

"I think there are some very serious things that will be with us for a really long time, and I think that there is going to be a place for community groups like us to do the hard stuff: the gap filling... working out where the problems are and trying to hook things up and make things work enough... I've met some amazing people and have made some really deep friendships and I would like to think that we're going to be doing really awesome work on community building even after all of this."

Profile

West Chesterton is one of the wealthier wards in Cambridge, but there is "a lot of inequality." A quarter of the ward's population, around 2,000 people, are aged 50-69. The Mutual Aid response in the area started via Facebook.

"Mutual aid groups sprung up in response to the COVID-19 crisis all over the UK and all over the world... before it was declared that the coronavirus was a pandemic. Because there were a few months where [the virus] was growing and it was not looking very good, but it was apparent to a lot of people that we just didn't have the systems in place to look after people... It's a self-organising system where people that want to do good, that want to look after their community will just organise themselves. It was a really wonderful thing to see happen."

Volunteers have delivered shopping and medicines, driven people to hospital, and made friendly phone calls. They have led community public art projects, held social events, prepared and delivered food parcels, supported vaccine rollout, connected and disseminated information, and helped to support local businesses.

At the time of the interview, the Mutual Aid group had 121 volunteers registered, with a core group of 25 people that "do most of the work." We spoke with Clara Todd, one of the core team.

Particularly at the start of the pandemic, the group was essential to support people to access goods and services online – often because of digital exclusion.

"If you didn't already [order online] with Sainsbury's or any sort of supermarket, then you just couldn't register. Supermarkets were not yet prepared for the 100%+ rise in demand back then, and were not taking more customers, even those who were clinically extremely vulnerable... With the help of technology, we connected those who needed help to those who could help. Neighbours helped neighbours."

Digital support during the pandemic

Clara noted that people aged 50-70 – as opposed to older people 70 and over – often had systems of support through family and friends. Some, however, would still contact the mutual aid group because they wanted support from outside their family (perhaps because a family with young children at home "had enough to deal with"). Clara described cases where even people with devices were not using them for one reason or another. One man had a computer virus and could not resolve this himself, and at the time no one could visit the house. Others were contacting the mutual aid group for support and companionship because they did not see computers as a way to access this.

"There can be a lot of emotional issues around using a computer... We have somebody that we regularly support that really doesn't like going online. For him, it means work, so he's not turning to technology like a lot of us have for our social engagement."

Primarily, the group has been supporting digitally excluded people by enabling them to access services and social connection through other means – in particular through a telephone line to provide "social support for people's mental health." But the group also signposted to a local charity specifically focused on digital inclusion, as well as directly providing some support at a distance in people's gardens when this was allowed.

A challenge for mutual aid groups – often recently-formed, volunteer-based and without specialist expertise – has been dealing with people in crisis and setting up systems to signpost people to specialist help.

"The pandemic certainly had a terrible impact on people that are already struggling... We started getting some quite scary things... Luckily, we've got a whole list of referrals [and email addresses for people at the council] if things get too complicated [and] we've had a lot of experience now."

Some people supported by the group welcomed the social aspect of the support, while others "made it very clear that they don't want the social aspect, they just want the transaction, their prescription to be delivered."

Clara emphasised that the group itself was dependent on digital technology, and in particular tools that had wide adoption and which many people were familiar with.

"I am not sure what we would have been able to do if there wasn't WhatsApp...The technology that people use is not necessarily the best technology, but if it's good enough, we'll go with that. Google Docs was really, really key. Being able to file share and be able to react to new information and create resources for people – and our protocols... – was really, really important. And of course you can work collaboratively [and not have to have emails going back and forth]."

Learning from how other groups had approached issues had been an enjoyable part of developing the group. Key resources she mentioned included guidance from the National Food Service regarding safeguarding, and QueerCare's infection control protocols for volunteers interacting with people at risk from COVID-19. Clara is proud of the referral system the group has developed, with points for check-ins for safeguarding of volunteers and people receiving support. She emphasised that the journey of working out for themselves how their group wanted to do things was important.

"I'm not sure how much is really transferable because I actually wouldn't want to take that away from people."

For more information:

mutualcambridge.org.uk/westchesterton | facebook.com/MutualWestChesterton | Video: How Cambridge Helped Its Elderly Community Through the Lockdown

North Manchester Community Partnership

John Curtin is the Project Manager at North Manchester Community Partnership (NMCP), a charity based in Cheetham Hill. It is a diverse area with high deprivation, and the pandemic has led to a lot of furlough and redundancy. NMCP works with organisations across North Manchester to support people with employment, welfare benefit claims,housing, immigration and digital skills – as well as social activities. NMCP is registered as a UK Online Centre, and employs five advisors, two tutors and has a team of volunteers.

The organisation works in partnership with the Department of Work and Pensions via local JobCentres, as well as refugee and asylum seeker organisations and Sure Start centres. John facilitates a weekly Citizens Advice remote surgery, where people experiencing debt or other major issues can be signposted.

Prior to the pandemic NMCP had a high foot fall, and a third of those supported were 50-70 years of age. They supported at least 200 people a week.

John told us that since the pandemic,

"The figures have shifted. The older ones that we've helped but I've not spoken to for years, they kept my number, and they've come back again. You know, they were starting on their digital journey – and then at this time they've all come back because there's too much they haven't been able to do."

He continues:

"People who've lost their jobs are having to register for Universal Credit for the first time, and it's not just making a claim – they've got to login every week and remember passwords. When they are on their own and having to actually do it for real, that's where the confidence issue comes in."

During the lockdown, NMCP supported 18 residents aged 50 -70 with either a tablet or laptop. The devices came from a variety of sources, including funding from Good Things Foundation, the local council, as well as from their own funds.

The charity were also supported by nine student volunteers, trained by the Barclay's Digital Eagles programme, who delivered IT-related support, particularly helping people with job and housing applications. John said:

"When the pandemic kicked in, we hit the ground running. We had to shut the centre. I straight away set up the home based support and some online classes for digital skills."

All face-to-face appointments were provided in a COVID-19-secure venue, with up to 25 people seen a day.

John believes they will keep using remote support for a number of things that can be more easily done this way. He told us:

"It's a bit of a weird way or learning, but they've had no other option sometimes. It's a bit hard work at beginning, but all that's over. We got bombarded that much. We adapted to it pretty quickly. For many of them, we've got them to a point where a lot of the focus has been quick phone calls, and you can tell that they've got used to it. Sometimes they ring me up, but it could be a two minute phone call and they could be on computer."

Another problem that John found was that 20-25% of service users didn't have a device, and those that did experienced limitations with what they could do with it:

"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 that a lot of them were struggling because they just didn't know how to do things."

John said that providing remote support has dramatically extended the amount of time needed to provide support. He said: "Until we got into a rhythm, each person would take hours. It was really tiring. Plus the fact that with a lot of our learners, they've got language barriers."

The volume of people needing help and the additional time needed to provide support have led to a punishing workload:

John said "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 been doing 100 hours weeks, I was burning out. Doing one-to-one bookings with people is harder than groups of 30 people."

John also expressed his concerns about the long-term impact for employment – particularly for people aged 50-70:

"There's usually a lot of jobs in Manchester, but the job market has tailed off at the moment. I'm quite optimistic it'll pick up soon after. But I do worry that the 50 plus are going to struggle to find work. I really do. There's going to be a long-term issue of unemployment again. I think digital skills are going to play a big part – they're bound to. There are going to be a lot of students coming out of university and they've got digital skills and they're going to slot straight in. Because everything's digital now, it's changed us as a nation. We're not going to be the same as we were before now. These things have definitely changed."

Since the first national lockdown, the project has helped over 1,400 individuals/households and the proportion of those helped aged 50-70 has been about twice as high. The majority of individuals supported (79%) have been from BAME background, and many use English as an Additional Language.

The organisation has received a lot of gratitude from people who have been supported. John said:

"They feel more confident when they know that you're on the other side of the phone, that if they need you – if they're stuck. A lot have actually come down to see me at the centre just to say "thank you" and to show off how they can log in."

He continues:

"One family brought me a lovely letter, the kids had signed it.
The father had died – he got COVID-19 before we actually got on lockdown. The mother called when he died – everything was in his name, and she had nothing... I gave her one of the devices we had been using for sessions... and we sorted out all the benefits for her."

For further information, please visit:

nmcp.org.uk

facebook.com/northmanchestercommunitypartnership

Northfield Community Partnership
Profile

Northfield Community Partnership (NCP) is registered as a UK Online Centre. People in the community can use computers there and get digital skills training and support to complete online tasks, such as housing applications.

We spoke with Lois Maguire, Coordinator of the Neighbourhood Network Scheme (NNNS) run by NCP.

NCP were commissioned by Birmingham City Council to provide support, advice and a grant scheme for community assets supporting residents over the age of 50. In September 2019 two staff members were employed and the scheme was launched in January 2020.

NCP initially started supporting the Northfield community after the Longbridge factory was closed which resulted in a large increase in unemployment in the local area. Deprivation is high, and the area has a high number of older people who are living independently at home.

Before the pandemic

The NCP venue has six computers which are used for courses and to support members of the community who attend for specific assistance: "always busy… those computers were always filled." Even prior to the pandemic, the closure of local post office branches provided a hook for volunteers to engage with the community to help with digital tasks such as paying bills and rent online rather than having to travel further afield.

Support from NNNS takes three main forms: capacity building and training, funding, and promotion. Promotion is through a directory of 154 support services in the area and is used by adult social care, GPs and social prescribers. This provides a link between older residents and accessible support that is of interest. The scheme has the capacity to provide up to £10,000 in funding for either new or established projects.

Digital support during the pandemic

At the start of the COVID-19 crisis, NCP set up a dedicated emergency phone number for residents offering support with food parcels, prescription collection, housing/benefits advice, and friendly phone calls. NNNS contacted all 154 community assets, mapped at the start of the project in January 2020, to establish which were still operating. Only 18 of these were still offering some form of support to the local community. NNNS created a new emergency asset directory to advertise and support local businesses who offer food delivery and other services. Hosted by local news and

information site B31 voices, 254 street champions were recruited to support residents on their street, with the added benefit of training from NCP.

NNNS received digital literacy referrals from across their network and used the opportunity of connecting with people to understand their digital needs:

"When a referral comes in, we will be asking people "OK, what are your needs? What can you already do? … [We've had people] that are really good at the Internet – have worked in an office – but don't have their own device at home. Or it might be that somebody has never had the Internet, never had a device, and literally wouldn't even know how to turn it on."

Lois emphasised that redundancies and other impacts of the pandemic, such as limited income led to further need for support:

"We've had lots of people lose their jobs, and some people's access to the Internet was through work devices… Once they were made redundant, [the device] was taken off them, which meant that they didn't have access to that anymore. Or it might have been that they can use a device, but they they've had to cut costs… Things like the Internet or the Sky is quite often the first thing to go… Which would mean that they would also lose the Internet as well."

While many employers whose staff shifted to working from home were covering the costs of devices themselves, this was not true in all cases – and workers could apply to NNNS for money to cover costs. Lois said that a very high percentage of people who were normally attending NNNS activity groups didn't have access to either Zoom or a computer. Sessions were moved online, but people were unable to access them.

Challenges during the pandemic

As with other organisations, the major challenge for NCP was the rapid increase in the scale of support required.

"I would say for the first 12 weeks of lockdown, we were all working about 12-15 hour days… We were giving out about 1,000 food parcels a week… It was exhausting, but it was for a good outcome… I think we're all still tired."

Digital exclusion was a significant issue – overlapping with other support needs for people were either isolating or shielding.

"A lot of the local doctor surgeries were saying if you need a repeat prescription that you can't come in and drop it in the box anymore, but you can send an email to our prescription inbox and we'll just send it straight to the pharmacy and [people were saying] 'Well, I haven't got the Internet, so I can't even ask for a repeat prescription. And then I can't go out so I can't pick up my prescription.'"

Through DevicesDotNow, NNNS was able to gift some smartphones and tablets to older people without access to the internet. NNNS also started a

Digital Lending Library using laptops. They were clear that digital support was needed alongside the distribution of devices.

"There's no point in this giving you the Internet and giving you a device and you not being able to use it, you are going to need some support in doing that…"

NNNS produced laminated printed crib sheets to help people to switch on laptops, identify USB ports and plug in a dongle. The sheets also include how to identify when a volunteer is providing remote assistance.

The lending library was ideal to allow people to try a device and, if they were interested and had the means, put them in touch with another local organisation offering refurbished devices at lower prices (£65-£200). NNNS opted for laptops rather than touchscreen devices as they found that older people were reporting that they found touchscreens difficult to get used to. NCP worked with Pinfields IT, who provided dongles and SIM cards to people without broadband, and set up remote access software to lock and track devices remotely. They also supported learners remotely.

Lois described digital support as her favourite project because of the beneficial impact even for people who were not motivated to get online. Being able to say, "Well, you can just borrow this one for a bit and see how you get on" seemed to work well with people who would say, "Don't worry about it, I probably won't get on with it" to offers of gifted devices.

"There was somebody that was really reluctant, and was getting a lot of support from other organisations - as far as shopping for him. And the shopping was coming in and… he was saying 'why have they bought me rice? I don't even know how to cook rice!'… Now he actually goes on to the Morrisons website himself, he's got his favourite list in there that he's been supported in setting up… and he's got that element of independence. One of the main reasons for NNNS is to be keeping people at home for longer, but for them to be safe in doing so and for them to be happier in doing so. And that's what this digital project has done."

For more information:

northfieldcommunity.org | facebook.com/NorthfieldPship | pinfieldsit.co.uk/ | b31.org.uk/covid19

Pat, 69, Uckfield, Sussex.
The importance of informal digital support and social connection

"We talk about anything and nothing – it's a lifeline for someone like me... If I can't find out about something – she looks things up for me on the computer."

Profile

Pat lives alone. After a 30-year relationship ended she became, in her words, "alienated from everybody I've ever known, apart from someone I work for." During the pandemic she has had some social contact with her next-door neighbours. Both are more at risk from the virus than her, so "they don't go anywhere." Pat has arranged – via phone calls – to do shopping for them, and when restrictions were relaxed in the summer accompanied them on some walks. However, she doesn't know anyone else who lives on her estate, and – other than an exercise class delivered over Zoom – hasn't had any contact with social or activity groups since the pandemic: "I put my TV on in the morning, and it doesn't go off till the end of the night – that's my company."

Before the pandemic

Before the pandemic Pat had an iPad which she used for Solitaire and Sudoku. She recently obtained a smartphone which she uses mainly for phone calls. She works one day a week for a local golf club – when COVID-19 restrictions allow – which she has been doing for 17 years.

"I did use computers at work – not very well I must admit. [But] when I gave up [full time] work, I gave up computers... The guy that I lived with – I left it all to him. When I got to be on my own, I thought 'oh dear!'"

Internet use: proxy use, informal support

Pat does use the internet for communicating with her sister and work colleagues, online exercise classes, Facebook, and online banking. She is happy navigating between the apps she has and proud that she can add people to her smartphone contact list. She is much less confident with digital tasks she isn't familiar with – and is fearful of security implications and frustrated by spam emails. She regularly relies on informal support and proxy internet use – where someone uses the internet on her behalf – and prefers communicating by telephone.

Pat has received letters from her local council offering support but didn't feel she needed it, saying "I do try to be as independent as possible." Early in the pandemic she was asked if she needed help with anything by the local fire service, who set her up with weekly befriending calls with a woman a year younger:

"We talk about anything and nothing. It's a lifeline for someone like me… If I can't find out about something, she looks things up for me on the computer."

Her employer at the golf club has been supporting her with technology, such as helping her set up broadband when she moved house 2 years ago. More recently, when her TV stopped working, she phoned her employer who went online and talked her through getting it back to life. Pat browses Amazon for things to buy, including this year's Christmas presents, but gets her employer to do the ordering for her.

Following a recommendation from her sister Pat also joins exercise classes on Zoom twice a week. Each time the woman running the class phones up before the session to help Pat log in:

"I do the Zoom on my little iPad but can only get into that because the lady tells me how to… If I've got the phone in one hand and the iPad in the other and someone says, now press that button, and that button, then I'm fine. But ask me 10 minutes later and I couldn't do it again."

Pat is an internet user but her use is limited, based on "mostly doing what I'm comfortable with." Pat is aware that her device, as well as her own memory, affects her experience but she isn't interested in investing in further devices, in part because she doesn't want to do everything online. "I can only get to watch her and me in the bottom corner, not enough screen to see all the others participating, but I would be able to with a laptop. I haven't got a laptop, or a printer but, to be perfectly honest I don't see the real need."

"I don't understand why people can't pick up a phone and have a conversation rather than write to me. ."

Difficulties during the pandemic

Pat has never tried to do online grocery shopping since living alone. When it first became an option, her and her then partner tried a few times but did not have great experiences. Once she lived alone she lost any interest in shopping in this way. She has continued to visit her local supermarket to do her shopping during the pandemic.

"I'm on my own, all day every day, and to go to my small little Tesco once a week and talk to the lady on the checkout is a lifeline to me."

Her weekly trips to Tesco have even provided a source of digital skills support – though this type of support has obvious limitations:

"A lad in Tesco helped me get my smartphone emails into folders – like how I used to have them on my work computer, and I know I can put my thumb on [an email] and move it to a folder but… I was standing in the middle of Tesco in the middle of a pandemic and it went in one ear and out the other… I need

someone to help me make new folders. I need someone to speak slowly so I can write it down. If I don't write it down, if I don't do it 50 times, I don't know what I'm doing."

Learning a little about a digital service but requiring help to use it fully is a familiar theme for Pat. Again following help from her employer she has been using Facebook since the pandemic. She is Facebook friends with her employer and his wife, gets messages from the organisation running the Zoom exercise classes, and can look at what people are selling on the platform. Indeed,

"Since we've been locked down I've spent a lot of time – wasting my time – on Facebook."

As well as her frustration at spending time browsing posts made by others on the social network, she expressed frustration that she has "no idea whatsoever" how she herself could post. This sense of frustration contributes to a sense of being left behind by things others know:

"When we're not in the middle of a pandemic I have my nails done every week. The lady tells me, you should look up this on Instagram and oh! This and that, and… I haven't a clue! I haven't a clue!"

Pat's concern that she does not know enough overlaps with concerns about security,

"If you want to buy anything or do anything you need an email address." She stresses that she doesn't "give [her email address] to anybody willy-nilly, like when I'm on Facebook… I don't buy clothes or do online shopping now. Once I saw a garden light I was interested in, and ever since then I get lots of rubbishy emails that drive me absolutely mad

I do banking online with my tiddly iPad. But I never press "remember me" – I put in details each time… I'm of the age where I don't trust it enough to not get scammed."

Despite her often negative view of her own abilities, and her preference for communication over the phone, Pat has benefitted from the social connection enabled by digital devices during the pandemic:

"The WhatsApp and texts and everything have been useful… We've got a group for [work] and [my employer] has been very, very good about keeping people updated during the pandemic with an email at least once a week. He puts on quizzes, publishes recipes as well as telling us… when they might be able to open the clubhouse again … which is nice.

I've only been on WhatsApp a couple of years – I don't know much about it. All I know is I can receive and I can send messages to my sister. My sister sent me something that I thought was really funny the other day… a picture of a load of sticks in the garden, with rubber gloves on. And she said 'I'm a bit

disappointed that the daffodils I planted last year have come up as marigolds!' and I did think that was quite clever."

Connecting with her nephew has also brought pleasure.

"Her son suddenly out of the blue sent me a WhatsApp – I'd never had one from him before! But I bought his daughter a popcorn-making machine as a Christmas present, and he sent a tiny video of her using it and saying she absolutely loved it… so that really pleased me!"

Pat is now receiving ad-hoc support over the phone from a Citizens Online Digital Champion, who has helped her create new folders for her emails, and who she can call when she needs help. She came to the attention of our organisation through the phone poll.

Samafal

"A lot of people were furloughed… a lot of people lost their jobs… We had families who actually were starving… Panicking about what they are gonna feed their children and it was a nightmare to us, but we made it through, and will come back."

Profile

Samafal is a non-profit company working in Edmonton in the borough of Enfield, an area of north London with high levels of deprivation and people living with activity-limiting health conditions. It works to support families and individuals to overcome barriers and integrate into wider society, with a focus on BAME women and children, and people with English as an Additional Language – in particular the local Somali community. "Samafal" means supporting people, and the organisation focuses on support with training, employment and setting up self-employment and self-assessment tax returns. This case study is based on an interview with the Managing Director, Kaltun Abdillahi.

Before the pandemic

Samafal was set up in 2000 and became a limited company in 2008. Working with Southgate and Barnet College, Jobcentres, entrepreneurs and carers agencies, Samafal provides three types of services:

– Employment services

– Education services

– Advocacy & information services

Samafal has been helping people with digital for years, but particularly since the introduction of digital-by-default Universal Credit, and has delivered combined English and digital classes. In Enfield, the 2011 Census reported 14% of the population lived in households where no one had English as a main language. During the pandemic, Samafal operated with volunteers who could each speak different languages (including Arabic, Bengali, Farsi, Gujarati, Somali, Swahili, Turkish and Urdu).

Digital support during the pandemic

Samafal faced a huge increase in demand for support, including digital support. Early on 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 and their interactions with furlough payments and the 'benefit cap'.

Samafal offered support over the phone and via Facebook. As a registered UK Online Centre, Samafal distributed 200 tablets, each with a year's worth of data, thanks to the DevicesDotNow and Connecting Families schemes.

Deep roots in the community meant Samafal attracted calls from people in need:

"Luckily, most people have my phone... I've been using it since 2003, I've never changed my number so everyone who knows it just picks up the phone... People would call you late... what could you do? I ended up saying to people 'just text me, I'll get back to you' and then you have to delegate this stuff... we used a shared email account."

Kaltun described the problem of encountering people not only without digital skills, but without devices or identity documentation. People who were not eligible for furlough and were on zero-hours contracts, or who had been made redundant, often had little understanding of what would be required of them in order to access benefits and job opportunities in the current job market. Many did not have email addresses, or smartphones; verification codes associated with applications created problems. Helping someone into employment started with finding the money and pictures for identity documents, alongside digital support:

"They worked all their lives and then suddenly, if you don't have a job, how are you meant to get another job? You don't have the skills... Digital skills is the hardest to deal with, with somebody who'll say "Why do I need it?" "Do you have a passport?" "Why do I need it?" So... I get them a passport, find them some money to get a passport, then get them into the system, because you won't get any benefit if you don't have any ID.

And this is really, really a nightmare for over 50s because they didn't bank on being jobless at that age... And now everything has to be done online. Job search, web applications, getting housing benefit... everything has become a

nightmare for these people… Getting a job, for example, at Tesco's – before, you just had to give your CV and hope they called you. But now they do an online test and if you don't pass that test they never call you…"

Challenges during the pandemic

As well as levels of demand for support, two other major challenges faced by Samafal were funding and the complex situations people who needed support were often in.

Though it received some money from the National Lottery's emergency response fund, Samafal's income is largely based on contracts. Funding is often based on 'payment-by-results' – for example, getting people into work. The restrictions introduced to address the pandemic meant that some types of contracted work could not be delivered, while economic impacts meant it is much harder to get people into work:

"I have to do more work that I'm not getting paid for because there's a greater need… To adapt it means that you will become selfless rather than saying 'Now it's five o'clock, I'm out of work,
I don't really care what happens'. Now if somebody says 'My landlord is harassing me' or '[I have a problem with my] Council Tax' … change has to be so quick and swift…"

The impact of the pandemic has been dramatic in the area. The greater need for digital support around accessing benefits and jobs has been associated with increased levels of poverty, and with wider support needs that can make providing digital support difficult:

"If she's having difficulty on this, how can you focus on digital skills? It's a barrier."

"People don't prioritize on the cost of the Internet. It's not important if you got to pay your council tax, your rent, your gas, electricity… We're getting all these calls and then you have to prioritize who's hungry and who isn't… We had a lot of domestic violence… In Somali culture when someone dies, you go to the family for seven days and stay with them and you feed them, and you couldn't. You just had to stand by the window and say condolences… and stress for children was creating mental health issues. We had a lot of families where the children were out and taking drugs… So we had we set up a bilingual counselling service over the phone."

As with other organisations, Samafal utilised local emergency food distribution to inform people of wider offers of support – as well as providing food themselves during Eid. They have also engaged peer-support and existing networks to assist people to develop digital skills, and to extend their reach into the community:

"One of the things I did with the groups is that if somebody knew a lot of things, they could become a mentor for somebody else – I would pair people

up. For the majority of people we have that are over 50, they support each other... We ask [some of the learners] if they could do the volunteering please because we need help... There's ten families that are in your area, you know them. They would speak the same language: 'Could you give them the food? Could you do this?'"

Alongside frequent digital support needs this approach often provided essential social contact and an ability for people to air their stresses:

"I think it's changed – we've changed – in the sense that we've become human support. Human support has become the most successful thing in COVID-19... Even though we're talking about digital, I think it's a human contact that we all need."

For more information:

samafal.org.uk | facebook.com/SamafalLtd

Appendix 2: Key data and findings from the rapid review

In order to place our research in context, we conducted a rapid review of literature and data.

As well as incorporating research we were aware of as a charity operating in the sector, we conducted internet searches including the terms "digital exclusion," "digital skills" or "internet use" and "pandemic," "COVID-19," or "lockdown." Information was included on the basis of relevance to the research questions (see Appendix 3). The rapid review includes references to the broad body of research including a number of annual surveys and datasets that cover aspects of digital exclusion. This included ONS data on internet users (2019) and internet access (2020a, 2020b); Ofcom's <u>Connected Nations</u> (quarterly, 2019a, 2018a), <u>Adults: Media use and attitudes</u> (2019b), and Access and inclusion (2018b) reports – together with insight into the pandemic (Ofcom, 2021); and Lloyds Bank's (2021, 2020) annual UK Consumer Digital Index (CDI).

This section summarises key data and findings in four areas:

– The impact of the pandemic on digital behaviour

– The impact of the pandemic on organisations providing digital support

– The unequal impact of the pandemic and government restrictions

– Digital exclusion among people aged 50-70, prior to the pandemic

There is a broad body of research including a number of annual surveys and datasets that cover aspects of digital exclusion, including ONS data on internet users (2019a) and internet access (2020a, 2019b); Ofcom's Connected Nations (quarterly, 2018a, 2019a), Adults: Media use and attitudes (2019b), and Access and inclusion (2018b) reports – together with insight into the pandemic (Ofcom, 2021); the Lloyds Bank's annual UK Consumer Digital Index (CDI, 2020 – which includes some data on the pandemic) and Business Digital Index (BDI). These are complemented by a range of reports from

academic or third sector organisations focused on digital inclusion, such as Oxford Internet Institute's Perceived Threats to Privacy Online report (Dutton & Blank, 2019) or doteveryone's Digital Attitudes report (2018).

The risks that requirements to stay at home and shifts to digital service delivery could leave significant numbers of people who are not online or lack skills or confidence socially isolated, lonely, or experiencing mental health distress have been widely reported on (for example: Lloyds CDI, 2020; APPG on Digital Skills, 2020; APPG on Social Integration, 2020; AgeUK, 2020). There has been considerable focus on the challenges faced by older adults in particular (Moore & Hancock, 2020; Nesta, 2020; Siefert et al., 2020; Watts, 2020), though this is often about people aged 70 and over rather than those approaching later life (BT, 2020b). Some reports have emphasised the impact of restrictions on physical and mental health and wellbeing – including for people aged 50-70 (Centre for Ageing Better, 2020a; AgeUK, 2020).

A number of reports have paid particular attention to how the pandemic has raised the issue of data poverty (for example, DevicesDotNow, 2020b; Holmes and Burgess, 2020; Citizens Advice, 2021a, 2021b). Ofcom (2020) identify that 20% of households do not have a fixed broadband connection, and 25% of mobile subscriptions are "pre-pay" ("pay-as-you-go"). Citizens Advice (2021a, 2021b) estimated that in November 2020, 2.3 million people had fallen behind on their broadband bill, and one in six broadband customers struggled to pay their bill between March 2020 and January 2021, with disproportionate impact on disabled people, people on means-tested benefits, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

In addition, some research has begun to be published highlighting the value and importance of internet access during the pandemic – particularly for people aged 50 and over, people on low incomes, and marginalised groups (Lloyds, 2020; APPG on Digital Skills, 2020; Citizens Advice, 2021). There is some evidence regarding the impacts on organisations providing digital support (Mathers and others, 2020), though there has been little exploration regarding the new groups, organisations and networks formed since the pandemic, the types of digital support organisations have been able to provide, and the impact of these on people aged 50-70 in particular.

The impact of the pandemic on digital behaviour

There is considerable evidence of greater use of the internet for a variety of purposes during the pandemic/lockdowns. Much of this data is not broken down by age – and we can expect differential take-up in line with the data above:

– 78% of people agree that the pandemic has escalated the need for digital skills, while 80% agree that using technology has been a vital support to them (Lloyds, 2020)

– 53% of respondents had been using technology more often, 100 days after of restrictions (BT, 2020a)

– "35% said they had discovered a new skill they would continue to keep using after lockdown, such as mobile banking or using online GP services" (APPG on Digital Skills, 2020)

– 37% of adults in Great Britain have been "Using technology more than usual to help with their health and wellbeing" (APPG on Digital Skills, 2020)

– "15% of those employed have learnt new IT skills/technologies to adapt to new ways of working during COVID-19" (Mathers and others, 2020)

– "18% of furloughed workers have improved their online skills to make them more employable" (Mathers and others, 2020)

The necessity of an internet connection, and the skills and confidence to use digital devices has been particularly apparent for marginalised people, and people on low-incomes. In August 2020, Citizens Advice (2021) found that, of people with a home internet connection:

– "77% of people in a single-parent household said they were more reliant on their internet connection"

– "82% of disabled people used their internet to buy essentials such as food and medicine"

– "34% of people on low incomes said they have found using the internet important to be able to look for work"

There is some data available which looks at the impact on different age groups:

– 82% of people in their 60s, and 71% of people aged 70 and over "said the internet was important for them for talking to friends and family during lockdown" (Centre for Ageing Better/NatCen, 2020)

– The rate of 70-year-olds registering for online banking tripled during the first national lockdown compared to the same period of the previous year (Lloyds, 2020)

– A survey conducted in mid-June found 26% of 55-75 year olds, reported an increase in confidence using digital technology (techUK, 2020)

Organisations providing digital support

There have been a few reports that provide relevant data on the experiences of organisations providing digital support. The UK Online Centres Network surveyed network partners at the end of March 2020 and found that national lockdown measures had led to:

– 21% closing entirely

– 71% continuing to support their community remotely

– 61% experiencing a decline in demand

– 23% seeing increased demand "especially from more vulnerable people" (Mathers and others, 2020)

The 2020 Charity Digital Skills report (Skills Platform/Zoe Amar Digital, 2020) found:

– 66% of charities were "delivering all of our work remotely"

– 61% identified "an increased need to train and support our staff and volunteers to use digital tools"

– 61% said they would be "offering more online services"

– Around half of respondent charities are interested in helping service users with online access (47%), receiving guidance on digitising face-to-face services (46%) and scope to include digital in funding applications (45%)

– 21% said they had "cancelled services because we don't have the skills or tech to deliver them"

– 15% said they had "cancelled services because our users lack the tech or skills to make use of them online"

The considerable variation among charities was related to the stage of digital development that charities were at prior to the pandemic, "a concern at a time when adoption of digital needs to accelerate across the sector" (Skills Platform/Zoe Amar Digital, 2020):

– "At the paper based or curious stage, 38% have cancelled services because users lack the tech or skills to make use of them online, compared to 16% starting out with digital and only 8% of those advancing and 7% of those advanced"

– "More than one third of charities (37%) don't have the income to invest in digital"

– 20% of charities identified poor skills across a range of areas of digital, and 52% rated their basic skills as fair

– 40% say their digital service delivery is poor

– 34% saw "the fact that their audience is not online as their greatest challenge"

In addition to these formal initiatives, there has also been a widely reported resurgence of community support activity: volunteering and mutual aid. The All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration's (2020) report on Social Connection in the COVID-19 Crisis, for example, noting that "The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in more and new types of volunteering," and collating some dramatic statistics. Our research found these volunteers were regularly

helping people who were digitally excluded to complete tasks that others would do online – and occasionally providing digital support:

– "over 750,000 people signed up as NHS volunteers"

– "by the end of March 2020, 6% of adults had already volunteered with a charity or group that helps vulnerable and self-isolating people, amounting to 300,000 people. Since then, the number of volunteers has grown"

– "as of 17 April 2020, there were 2,773 mutual aid groups across the UK, each serving an average population of 23,958 people"

Though these figures are impressive, analysis by the secretariat of the APPG suggested areas with a "local population with lower skills and a lower proportion of graduates" had fewer identifiable mutual aid groups, which could suggest lower levels of support activity in areas with greater digital exclusion.[23]

Research conducted previously by the Centre of Ageing Better with NatCen has found that, with regard to all forms of support (not only digital), "Those potentially most in need of help were least likely to access it: a quarter (24%) of people aged 50-69 who are finding it quite difficult to get by said they were not aware of local voluntary groups, compared with 16% of those living comfortably" (Centre for Ageing Better, 2020b).

Unequal impact of the pandemic and government restrictions

The pandemic has not affected everyone equally. The impact of the pandemic and lockdown on groups more likely to experience digital exclusion has also been explored in a few reports. Medact, Migrants Organise and New Economics Foundation's report (2020) looks at migrant access to healthcare – including the role of digital exclusion, while Inclusion London (2021) cover look at Disabled People's experiences of COVID-19, for example. Several research points to a greater impact on Black people, people of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani or other Asian ethnicity, and on migrants. An early analysis by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020d, based on data from 2 March- 10 April 2020) "showed that, when taking age into account, Black males were 4.2 times more likely to die from a COVID-19-related death than White males."

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[23]As a analysis conducted in mid-April 2020, the report acknowledges that "It may be that mutual aid groups have been slower to get off the ground." Lower levels of mutual aid organisations were also associated with higher population churn, fewer community assets where people of different backgrounds can meet and mix, lower levels of neighbourhood trust, higher levels of social isolation, marked income or ethnic divides, or lower levels of civic participation generally could be factors.

Public Health England find that

"The impact of COVID-19 has replicated existing health inequalities and, in some cases, has increased them"
PHE, 2020

ONS data correlates mortality with deprivation:

"In England, the age-standardised mortality rate for deaths involving COVID-19 in the most deprived areas [was]... more than double the mortality rate in the least deprived areas"
ONS, 2020c

This disparity may be partly explained by different levels of exposure to the virus associated with work:

"Those with highest levels of household income spent more time working from home, whereas those with the lower levels of income spent more time working away from the home"
ONS, 2021a

The uneven impacts of the pandemic can also be seen in data on mental health impacts. Age UK (2020) report on both anxiety about increased vulnerability to the virus (and fears the public will not follow guidelines), the negative impacts of having to stay at home, and reduced contact, describing the experiences of older people who

"Spent days without speaking to anyone and were left feeling unloved, unwanted, and forgotten."
Age UK, 2020a

Previous research by the Centre for Ageing Better provides of the significant proportions of people affected, as well we the uneven impacts (Centre for Ageing Better/NatCen, 2020):

– 36% of 50-70-year olds report that their mental health has deteriorated as a result of the pandemic

– Those aged 50-60-years were more likely to report a negative impact (40% versus 30% of 61-70-year olds)

– Those who could be considered more vulnerable were also more likely to report a negative impact, including those who are:

  > Living alone (43% versus 36% overall)

  > Out of work (55%)

> Live in rented accommodation (45%)

> With a poor financial outlook (45%)

> Whose physical health has deteriorated (69%)

Digital exclusion and internet use

Data from the ONS shows just 1.1% of adults aged 18 and over in Great Britain who have never been online are aged under 50 ONS (2020a). Other data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2019a) tracks internet use by age group every year.

– By 2019, the proportion of people aged 65-74 who had used the internet at least in the last three months had increased to 83% from 56% in 2012, reducing the gap compared to younger age groups

– People aged 55-64 are very likely to be internet users (93%)

– Almost all people aged 45-54 (98%) had recently used the internet

– There are a variety of reasons why people are not online. The latest data from the ONS shows, of those who do not have internet access at home:

> 61% do not feel they need the internet

> 34% self-identify a lack of skills

> 33% mention privacy or security concerns

> 29% of households say the cost of equipment or access is a barrier

Digital exclusion is also affected by a lack of skills, prevalent even among those who are online. The Department for Education's Essential Digital Skills Framework (EDSF) outlines a range of tasks that can be considered "essential" for life – and, separately, that people may be expected to do throughout their work life.[24] The Lloyds UK Consumer Digital Index reports annual estimates based on this framework, with the latest edition (Lloyds, 2020) reporting:

– 11.7 million people in the UK without Essential Digital Skills needed for everyday life (22%)

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[24]See the Essential Digital Skills Framework website. The EDSF divides a total of 24 skills into five categories: Communicating, Handling Information and Content, Transacting, Problem Solving, and Being Safe and Legal Online. Underpinning these five categories are seven "Foundation Skills." Foundation digital skills refer to the abilities to: turn on a device, use the controls on a device, use accessibility tools to make a device easier to use, interact with the homes screen on a device, connect a device to a safe and secure Wi-Fi network, understand that passwords and personal information need to be kept safely, and to update and change a password when prompted to do so.

- 17.2 million people lack at least one of the Essential Digital Skills for Work (52% of the workforce)[25]

- Sizeable proportions of people aged 50-70 have no "Foundation" level digital skills or are missing at least one "Essential Digital Skill for Life": 12% of those aged 45-54, 26% of people aged 55-64, and 39% of people aged 65-74

Access to devices can also form an important aspect of digital exclusion. People aged 55 and over are more likely to lack access to smartphones, laptops and PCs (Lloyds, 2019):

- Half of people aged 65 and over did not have a tablet in their household (30% of 55-64s)

- 43% of people aged 65and over did not have a smartphone in their household (18% of 55-64s)

- 33% of people aged 65 and over did not have a laptop/PC (20% of 55-64s)

People in mid-later life are more likely to view the devices they do have, and the quality of broadband connections, as a barrier to using the internet more (Centre for Ageing Better/NatCen, 2020):

- One in five 50-69 year-olds don't have access to good enough broadband (18-20%)

- One in eight say their equipment is not good enough for them to use the internet more (13-15%)

Age is not the only factor in whether people are likely to experience some form of digital exclusion, it intersects with other risk-factors:

- Across all age groups, people on lower incomes are less likely to have all Essential Digital Skills: 64% of people with household incomes under £17,499 have all digital skills, compared to 84% of people with household incomes between £17,500-£39,999, and 94% of people with household incomes over £40,000 (Lloyds, 2018).

- Women aged 65 and over are less likely to use the internet (63.2%) than men in the same age bracket (71.1%), a 7.9% gap (ONS, 2019).

- Disabled people are less likely to be online, particularly among people aged 45 and over: 5.3% of disabled people aged 45-54 have never used the internet compared to 0.8% of non-disabled people of the same age, 9.8% compared to 2.9% for people aged 55-64, and 19.7% compared to 10.1% for people aged 65-74.

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[25]13.6 million workers have "Foundation" skills and "Skills for Life" but do not have "Skills for Work" (25% of total population aged 15+, 42% of the workforce).

Data published by the ONS in 2020 on internet activities people in different age groups had undertaken in the past three months shows how breadth of internet activity varies by age:

– People aged 45-54 are more likely to engage in all activity types than those in the 55-54 and 65 and over age groups – with the exception of some health-related activities, which we can reasonably assume is as much about need to use the services as digital capability and confidence.

– Differences were particularly large for making voice or video calls over the internet (21% of over 65s, 34% of 55-64 year olds, but 48% of 45-54 year olds).

– Social networking is much more common among 45-54 year olds (72%) than 55-64 (58%) and people aged 65 and over (34%).

– There is a stark divide with regard to internet banking – where half of those aged 65 and over (49%) engaging in this activity in the past three months, compared to over two-thirds of 55-64 year olds (69%) and four in five 45-54 year olds (82%).

Internet users aged 65 and over (53%) are less likely to bank online (compared to 73% of internet users overall) or to complete most public or civic processes online (Ofcom, 2020a). Key factors in this are self-assessment of skills, and trust/privacy concerns (Broadband Stakeholder Group, 2020). Research by the Centre for Ageing Better (Centre for Ageing Better/NAtCen, 2020) reported:

– Nearly half of 60-69 year olds cited their IT skills not being good enough as a reason for not using the internet more (47%), together with more than a third of 50-59 year-olds (36%)

– Over a quarter of 50-59 year olds (26%) and two in five 60-69 year-olds (41%) cited lack of trust as a reason not to use the internet more

It's important to say that concerns about privacy and security aren't unfounded, but are likely to relate to direct or indirect experiences – 20% of UK adults have been the victim of hacking or data theft, and 73% have received phishing emails (Nominet, 2020b). Many people do not know how to stay safe online. Though 77% of adults feel they knew enough, significant proportions do not understand or utilise security features:

– 14% have never changed a password without being prompted

– 20% have never changed their online banking password

– 45% said they do not always use secure Wi-Fi for online transactions

– Only 55% knew how to change their privacy settings on social media

– 71% did not understand two-factor authentication

Appendix 3: Full methodology

This appendix provides further information regarding the research questions and methods used to produce the findings. The three key research questions mentioned in the report were expanded as follows:

1. Are there people aged 50-70 who have missed out by not being online during this time?

– What have been the prime motivations for older adults to get online during this time – i.e. work, staying in touch with friends and family, shopping?

2. Which types of organisation and people have been delivering digital skills training/support?

– Has this changed from who would typically deliver this support?

3. How have organisations changed their service delivery?

– What has worked well in doing this?

– What are the challenges and gaps?

– How have organisations assessed the needs of users in this changing landscape and how have they met them?

– What are examples of useful practice and shared learning for the sector?

– What of the changes are likely to be sustained and what issues still remain?

The remainder of this appendix explores each of our three main methods of research in more details:

Phone poll

Our phone poll was designed to be representative of the 4.6 million people aged 50-70 living on gross household incomes of £25,000 or less across the UK as a whole. We commissioned Survation, a British Polling Council member, who collected responses from 502 people, between 18th and 20th November, 2020.

The target population amounts to 27% of the 16.7 million 50-70 year olds across the UK as of the 2018 ONS estimate.

Online surveys

We conducted two online surveys, one of organisations providing support, and one of people aged 50-70. We utilised SmartSurvey for both, publicising weblinks to surveys from Thursday 26 November until Sunday 17 January 2021. Surveys were circulated via our social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter), in Slack workspaces, and through email networks.

Online survey of organisations

Alongside sharing to Citizens Online's email newsletter and project contact lists, the survey for organisations was sent to UK Online Centres, and the COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK list of local groups.

A total of 252 individual responses from organisations were included in the analysis, though 7 of these provided answers to only some questions. 255 completed responses were received. A further 236 'partial responses' were collected by the SmartSurvey system used – but only 7 of these contained any content.[26] Six duplicates were removed where multiple completed entries had been submitted representing a single organisation (after answers were checked for consistency and any qualitative feedback retained).

We targeted the survey to organisations based in England – but received ten responses from organisations based elsewhere, including 6 from Scotland, 3 from Wales, 1 from Northern Ireland.[27] Within England, responses were received from across the country (Figure 11) – though with low representation of organisation in the North East and East Midlands.

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[26]Of a total of 46 partial responses collected, 17 were duplicates from organisations that had submitted complete survey responses and could be removed from the analysis, while 22 did not contain responses beyond the initial details and could not be used in analysis.

[27]The remaining two survey responses from outside England were received from an organisation based in Jersey, and one based in the US. These were excluded from the analysis, but the UK-based responses were included on the basis their experiences would not differ enormously from those of organisations in England, and were not large enough in number to bias the results.

Figure 11: Location of organisations that completed the online survey of organisations

Region of England	Organisations	Proportion
South East	43	17.1
South West	39	15.5
Yorkshire and The Humber	35	13.9
London	29	11.5
East of England	23	9.1
North West	22	8.7
West Midlands	22	8.7
East Midlands	11	4.4
North East	7	2.8
Outside England	21	8.3
Total	**252**	**100.0**

Organisations were also of a variety of different sizes – whether measured by catchment area (Figure 12), or number of staff/volunteers (Figure 13). Nearly half were small or voluntary-based, covering a local neighbourhood or town (44%) and/or having 11 or fewer members of staff (50%) and/or 50 or fewer volunteers (53.6%).
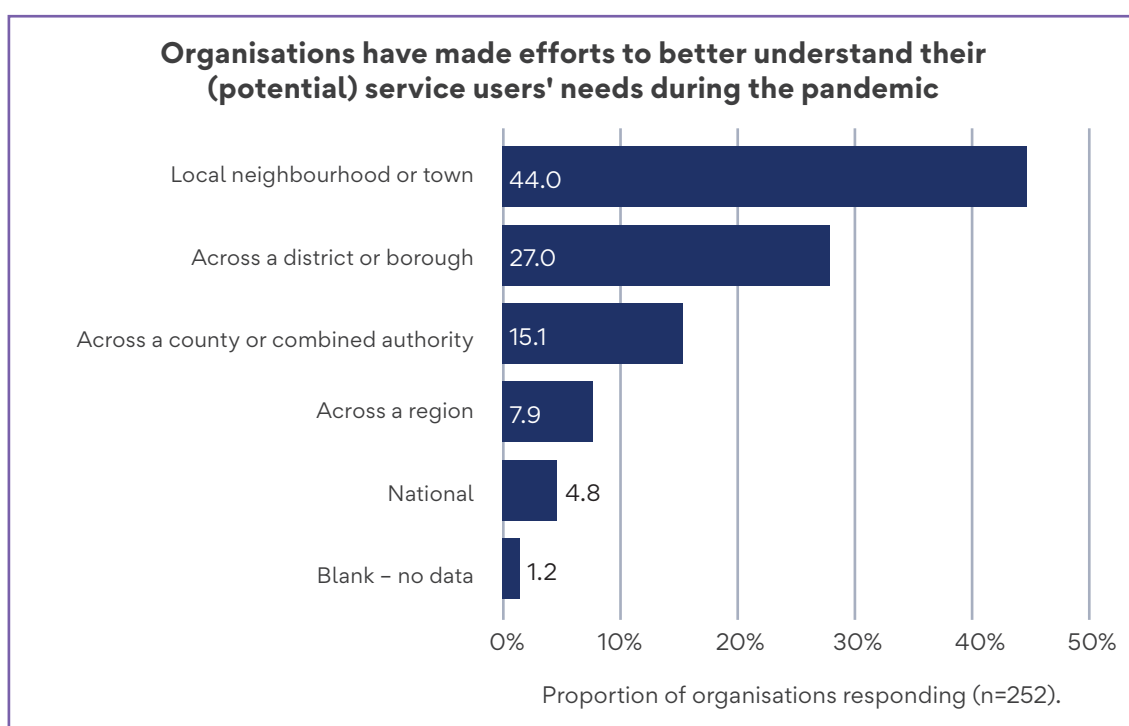
Figure 12: Online survey of organisations – respondents by organisation catchment area

Organisations have made efforts to better understand their (potential) service users' needs during the pandemic

- Local neighbourhood or town: 44.0
- Across a district or borough: 27.0
- Across a county or combined authority: 15.1
- Across a region: 7.9
- National: 4.8
- Blank – no data: 1.2

Proportion of organisations responding (n=252).

Figure 13: Online survey of organisations – size of organisation by number of staff/volunteers

Organisations have made efforts to better understand their (potential) service users' needs during the pandemic

Number of staff/volunteers

- 0: 21.0% (staff), 9.4% (volunteers)
- 1 to 11: 29.0% (staff), 3.3% (volunteers)
- 11 to 50: 18.7% (staff), 40.9% (volunteers)
- 51 to 100: 6.3% (staff), 12.2% (volunteers)
- 101 to 500: 8.3% (staff), 15.5% (volunteers)
- 501 to 1,000: 2.0% (staff), 1.7% (volunteers)
- 1000+: 4.0% (staff), 1.1% (volunteers)
- Left blank: 10.7% (staff), 16.0% (volunteers)

Proportion of organisations (n=252).

■ Number of staff ■ Number of volunteers

Figure 14: Online survey of organisations – responses by type of organisation, in full

Type of organisation	Responses	Responses (%)
Local Organisation	96	38.1
Mutual Aid/Neighbourhood Group	44	17.5
Library/Libraries Service	20	7.9
Council	13	5.2
Age UK brand partner	12	4.8
Education	11	4.4
Housing Provider	11	4.4
Charity	7	2.8
Partnership	6	2.4
Council for Voluntary Services (or similar)	5	2.0
Public Service	5	2.0
National Charity	4	1.6
Regional Charity	4	1.6
Local Business	3	1.2
Members Organisation	3	1.2
Citizens Advice local	2	0.8
Sport Club	2	0.8
Mental Health	1	0.4
National Business	1	0.4
National Charity branch	1	0.4
NHS Trust	1	0.4

Online survey of 50-70 year olds

A total of 327 individual responses were included in the analysis, though 58 of these only provided answers to some rather than all questions. 295 completed responses were received. 18 were removed from the analysis because respondents indicated their age was outside the 50-70 bracket. 10 responses were received from Scotland or Wales, and these were retained in the analysis, despite the research focusing on England – matching the methodology of the phone poll. A further 115 'partial responses' were collected by the SmartSurvey system used – but only 75 of these contained any content.[28]

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[28]Of the 75, 18 appeared (on the basis of IP addresses, survey start times, and answers) to be duplicates from people that had submitted complete surveys so could be removed from the analysis, while only 7 were contained responses beyond the initial details that could be used in analysis.

Responses were not analysed by demographic group, as sample sizes were too small, so it is important to make caveats about the sample, which is not representative of the population as a whole. Responses were received from people of different ages, with an approximately even spread across four age brackets dividing the 20 year target audience into four 5 year brackets.

Around 1 in 8 respondents did not provide an age (16.8%). The lowest number of responses were associated with the younger age bracket (50-54: 15.3% of all responses, and 18.4% of all those who provided an age), while the highest number were in the older age bracket (65-70, 30.9% and 20.7% respectively) – with the number of responses rising with age bracket. 18 responses were excluded from the analysis because respondents indicated they were not aged 50-70, but 55 partial responses where people did not provide an answer regarding their age were included.

However, other demographic indicators were skewed: 74.4% were women, compared to 51% in the 2018 ONS Mid-Year Estimate for 50-70 year olds. The Family Resources Survey 2018-19 finds 18% of working age adults and 44% of adults of State Pension age have a disability.

While there is no figure for people aged 50-70 specifically, the 10.6% of respondents to our online survey of 50-70 year-olds who reported they had a disability is certainly an under-representation of the population group. In addition, while the 93% of respondents who gave their ethnicity as white matches the Census 2011 data for 50-70 year olds (92.7%), however, it means we have samples which are too small to draw conclusions about people with other ethnicities (only eight responses).[29] Finally, responses were overwhelmingly from the South East (44.6%), South West (8%), and London (7.6%) – with particularly few responses from the North West (2.4%), the East of England (1.2%) and none from the North East (0%).

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[29]In addition, the proportion of responses from people selecting "Black/African/Caribbean/Black British" or "Asian/Asian British" are both substantially lower than the proportions in the population (0.7 compared to 1.8%, and 0.7 compared to 4.3%).

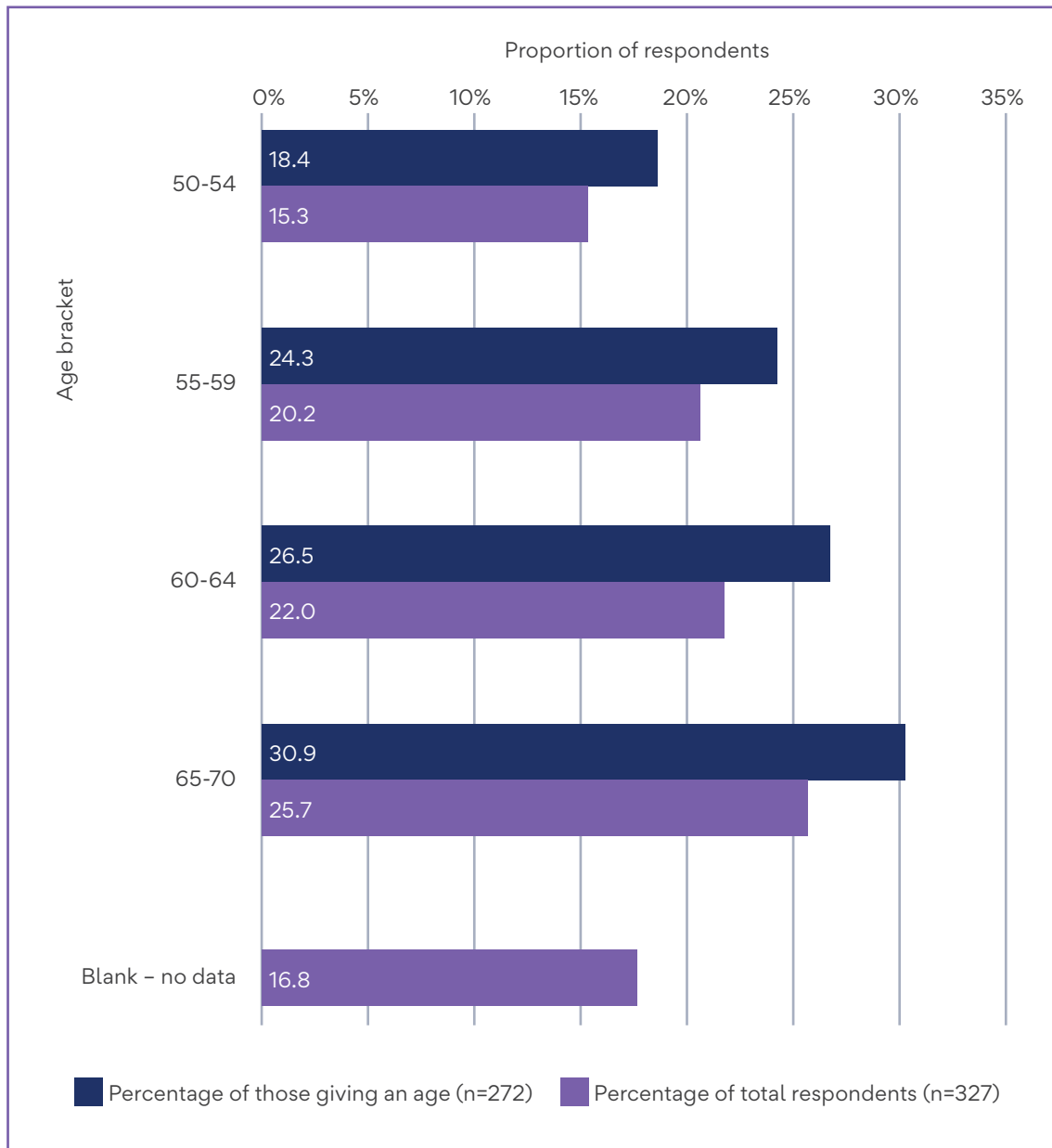**Figure 15:** Online survey of 50-70 year-olds – proportion of respondents by age bracket

Figure 16: Online survey of 50-70 year-olds – proportion of respondents by self-defined gender
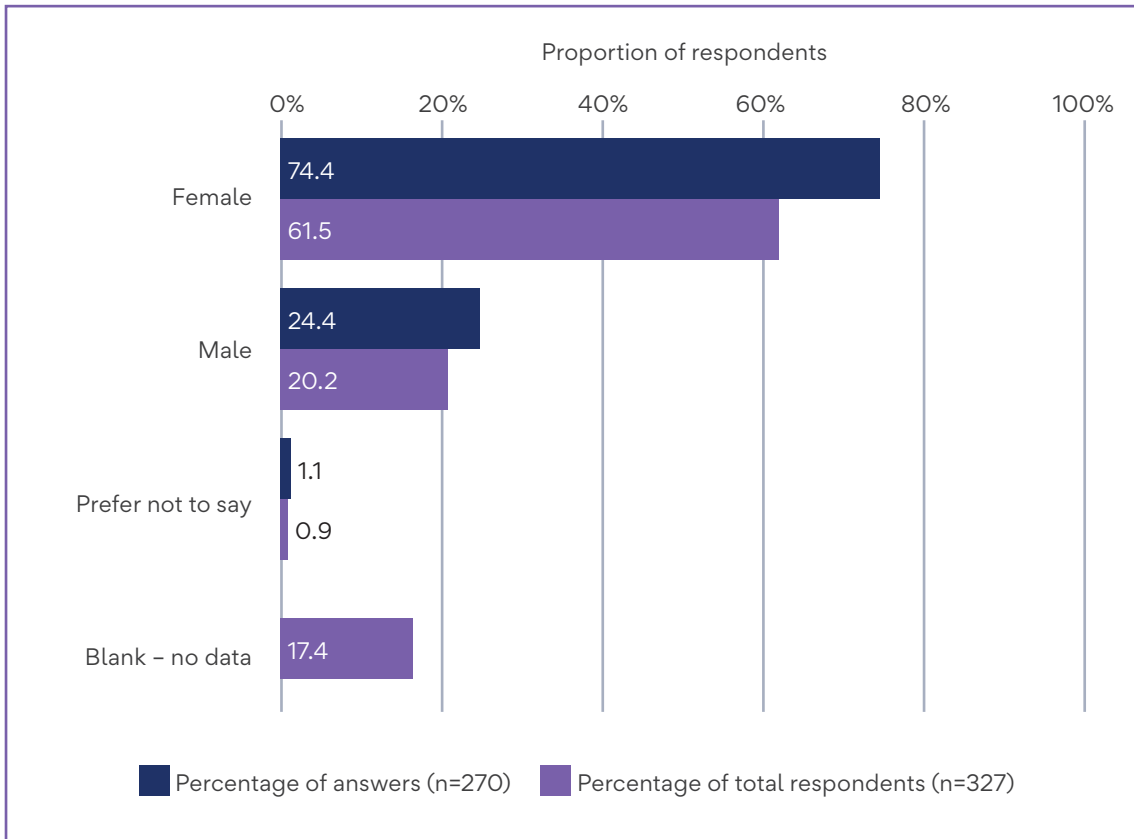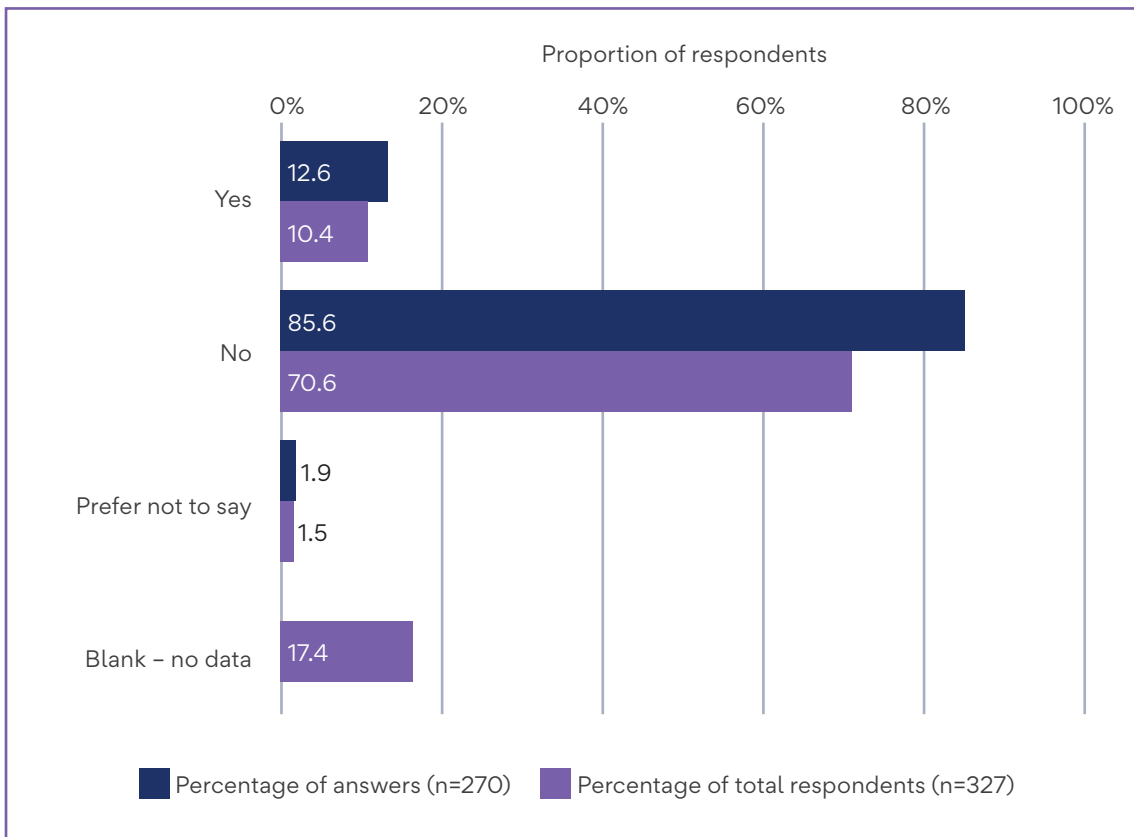

Figure 17: Online survey of 50-70 year-olds – proportion of respondents that consider themselves to have a disability

In-depth interviews

Interviews of 45 minutes to 1 hour were conducted via Microsoft Teams with individuals from nine organisations and eight people aged 50-70. Interviews made use of a semi-structured format, with a set of key questions and additional questions asked where respondents raised issues requiring follow-up. Interviewees were selected on the basis of answers to questions in our online surveys of 50-70 year olds, or organisations, or through indicating a willingness to be contacted after our phone poll of 50-70 year olds on lower incomes. We included organisations specialising either in digital support or support for people aged 50-70, generating responses from organisations based in rural, urban, and deprived locations, and organisations working with different demographic groups. We sought to ensure representation of people of different ages and backgrounds, but were reliant on willingness to be interviewed. Interviews were recorded, automatically transcribed, before being reviewed for editing.

Case studies were constructed on the basis of allowing people to speak for themselves about their experiences during the pandemic – whether as individuals or representatives of organisations. Where possible, verbatim quotes were selected that identified either unique experiences, or those which illustrated issues identified in the wider research. We do not pretend that the case studies are representative of the age group nor of organisations providing such support.

Questions used in interviews with individuals:

– Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

– Can you tell me a little about how you felt about the internet and digital technology prior to the pandemic?

– Can you tell me about any support you received to use digital devices or the internet prior to the pandemic – this includes any "informal" support from friends, family members, or colleagues? Would you have known of organisations to ask for help if you needed it?

– Have you started to use the internet and digital devices, or starting using them more, since the pandemic?

– Have you struggled with any of the following since the pandemic: getting access to devices, internet access, cost of devices/data, setting up and using new devices, the skills to do particular things online? Has one of these been a particular barrier?

– Are there things you've not been able to do because of restrictions – and an expectation you could do things online? Like connecting with family and friends, or social groups? Online banking/shopping, accessing health information or COVID-19 tests, financial support?

– Have you been able to access help to do those things digitally – again, this could include "informal" support? If you've received support – how? In person, over the phone, or over the internet?

– How challenging has it been to adapt - what has been most challenging?

– Which things have you enjoyed learning?

Questions used in interviews with organisations:

– Can you tell me a little about the work your organisation was doing around digital skills and inclusion prior to the pandemic, and the scale of this work?

– And how about more general support specifically for people aged 50-70?

– Which of the following have you found the organisations/people you work with have struggled with since the pandemic: getting access to devices, internet access, cost of devices/data, setting up and using new devices, the skills to do particular things online (and are there any particular things that have come up)?

– Have you been able to help with those things directly - or through signposting?

– How has the scale of support offered changed?

– Are any areas of support new for you?

– Are there things you've not been able to do because of restrictions?

How challenging has it been to adapt - and what has been most challenging?

Are there aspects of recent work you are particularly proud or and think others could benefit from adopting?

Do you plan to keep doing some of the things you have started doing recently even after restrictions are eased?

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Centre for Ageing Better

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The Centre for Ageing Better creates change in policy and practice informed by evidence and works with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities. Ageing Better is a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.

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