



HOUSE OF LORDS

## Select Committee on COVID-19

### Corrected oral evidence: Living online: the long-term impact on well-being

Tuesday 10 November 2020

10.15 am

Members present: Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho (The Chair); Lord Alderdice; Baroness Benjamin; Baroness Chisholm of Owlpen; Lord Elder; Lord Hain; Lord Harris of Haringey; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness Morgan of Cotes; Lord Pickles; Baroness Young of Hornsey.

Evidence Session No. 1

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 1 - 14

#### Witnesses

[I](#): Richard Hart, Deputy Head of the Library Service, Leeds City Council, and Team Manager of 100% Digital Leeds; Douglas White, Head of Advocacy, Carnegie UK Trust; Helen Milner, Group Chief Executive, Good Things Foundation; Ian Macrae, Director of Market Intelligence, Ofcom.

## Examination of witnesses

Richard Hart, Douglas White, Helen Milner and Ian Macrae.

Q1 **The Chair:** I welcome all our witnesses to the first formal evidence session of our inquiry. It is exciting to have you here. It is an extremely important topic. I am Martha, Chair of the Committee, and I have all my colleagues here apart from Ian Duncan, who may join the meeting later.

We also have a couple of people from my clerk's team and Nancy Hey, our special adviser to the project, who is helping us to keep focused on well-being. That theme is very important to the constitution of our committee. We were set up in the summer to look at the long-term implications of Covid and the economic and social well-being of the country. It is an incredible remit that is broad, complex and, as my colleagues quite rightly pointed out, everchanging as the nature of the pandemic has changed. Even in July we felt that there would be a different set of issues from the ones we feel now in November and, certainly with the news yesterday, we might feel differently again about the speed at which we come out of this, or not.

The first thing we did as a Committee was to gather lots of opinions from experts and members of the public about what they felt the long-term implications were. You can see that on our website; it is a huge resource of evidence. Thousands of people submitted things like poetry and pictures, and there was very much more formal evidence from scientists, academics and so on.

The themes that emerged were clear, and there were not many surprises, but one of the very key things was technology and the notion that we are living so much of our lives online. No surprise there, but that simple statement belies the huge amount of complexity. That is what we want to get into with our first inquiry.

I have worked in technology my whole working life and I certainly could not have predicted that this last eight months would have fast-forwarded what feels like five years. If you told me that we would be voting on our smartphones in the House of Lords I would probably have had a hysterical laughing fit and fallen off my chair. If the House of Lords can deliver technology at pace and speed, any organisation can, but has any organisation? You will be able to tell us the difficulties of doing that and the importance of the choppiness and patchiness with which the UK has progressed.

To remind everybody, our inquiry is focused on economic and social well-being and the impact of the extenuated digitisation on that theme. That is still very broad, but keep in mind that well-being is what Members are particularly interested in.

In our very first session today, we are looking at the people who are not, or maybe only partly, included in this digital revolution, and what that means for well-being, economically and socially. It is somewhat ironic that those people cannot be here present on a Teams meeting. That is partly the point, so we look to you to represent them and to tell us the

detail.

Usually I try to speak the least. We have all had your introductions in your bios, so maybe you could just say hello and give your organisations. Please do not feel that you need to give us those introductions again; Members are aware of what you are doing. We have a lot to cover, so before we get into the detailed questions, a quick introduction from you about where you have come from would be fantastic.

**Richard Hart:** I am deputy head of the library service for Leeds City Council, and within that function I also manage the 100% Digital Leeds team.

**Ian Macrae:** I am director of market intelligence at Ofcom. My team at Ofcom is responsible for the collection of a lot of the evidence base that we use to underpin our policy-making.

**Helen Milner:** I am the group chief executive at the Good Things Foundation, which is a large national digital and social inclusion charity. We also have a subsidiary charity in Australia, but that is not relevant today.

**Douglas White:** I am head of advocacy at the Carnegie UK Trust. We are a charitable foundation. We have a Digital Futures programme and are interested in the impact of digital technology on people's well-being.

**The Chair:** There are a few bits of housekeeping before we start. I remind everyone that, although we are not broadcasting live, we are being transcribed and recorded, so bear that in mind. Secondly, Members should declare any relevant interests before asking questions. That is very important. We will go through five or six themes of questions, and Members will lead on different subject areas. They are big and broad, so please feel you can come in at any moment. Eric Pickles will lead on the current levels of digital access.

Q2 **Lord Pickles:** It is nice to see you, those who have their cameras on, and nice to hear those who do not have their cameras on.

From the evidence submitted, it seems that digital exclusion probably relates to social exclusion generally; if you are socially excluded, you are more likely to be digitally excluded. Given the way we have been going, do you think that digital exclusion might lead to social exclusion?

**Helen Milner:** It is a brilliant question, and the answer is yes; there is very clear evidence of the overlap between digital exclusion and social exclusion. One example is a woman in her 80s with a degree and a good income is very likely to be an internet user, compared to somebody in their 40s on a very low income with no qualifications. We can see that underlying factors often drive social exclusion, and there are factors that drive digital exclusion. Your question is broader, though, and you are saying that by not enabling people to use the internet you are also making them socially disadvantaged.

A good example is someone who cannot apply for work online and so are excluded from the majority of employment opportunities. If people cannot manage their finances online and are in high levels of debt, they are excluded from all the financial and advice services that are made available online. The conditions that drive digital exclusion are often the same conditions that drive social exclusion, and, digital exclusion leads to social exclusion.

**Douglas White:** I agree. It is a very helpful question. To back up what Helen is saying, the analysis of the relationship between digital exclusion and social exclusion is well established. We did some work a couple of years ago that, while focused in Scotland, has feasibility more widely. As part of that work Ipsos MORI did some regression analysis for us of data on who was digitally excluded. That showed that households of working couples were the most likely to be digitally included, while non-working single households were most likely not to have digital access. The higher the levels of qualifications in a household, the more likely people were to be digitally included, and the younger the household, the more likely people were to be digitally included.

Tying that into Helen's point, with these kinds of issues it is important for us to understand that digital exclusion/inclusion is not a binary thing; if it ever was, it certainly is not now. There are multiple different aspects of digital exclusion, and the things that matter most will be quite different for different types of households. For some households, getting access to work will be critically important. For others, it might be getting access to education, or being socially engaged. You need different types of digital skills to do all those things.

It is becoming a more and more dispersed issue, and we have to think about the relationship between digital inclusion and social exclusion. We have to understand the key drivers for social exclusion issues which particular households and communities are experiencing, as well as the particular digital exclusion priorities which those households are experiencing.

It is very nuanced and individual, but underlying all that is a very strong correlation between the two and systemic issues to do with exclusion that tie both. It is a complex picture. We need to get into the granularity to unpick it and to take action.

**Lord Pickles:** Could you say something about the actual barriers to digital inclusion? We understand the problem of broadband availability, but what are the actual barriers that are holding the process back?

**Ian Macrae:** First, I will paint the story with some data. We know that 11% of households do not have internet access. That percentage is much higher among more vulnerable sections of society. It is particularly strong for old people, of course; four in 10 of those over 70 are digitally excluded—they do not have access. It is also stronger for those who are financially vulnerable and for those who are disabled, and when you have a combination of characteristics it gets even more so. Living alone has an

impact on the likelihood of being digitally excluded. More than half of those living alone who are aged 70 and over do not have access to the internet at home.

Another point related to that is that digital exclusion is not necessarily about not having access to the internet. One piece of fairly good news is that the large majority of households with children have some form of internet access. About 1% do not. But around 9% of households with children—over a million children—have access to the internet only through a smartphone, not through a computer or a tablet. That had profound implications when children were home schooling, for example. That is a major issue.

Coming to the barriers to taking up the internet, the biggest barrier when we do our research is that people say they are just not interested or they do not have the need to. Among the 11% of people who are not taking the internet, over half of them say that the primary reason for not taking the internet is they do not need it.

Underneath that, there are around 10% of people who say that they do not believe they have the skills. A similar proportion say that they would not feel safe on the internet, which again may be related to some level of digital literacy. There is a similar proportion who say that they cannot afford to get on the internet. There is a combination of factors but probably the biggest factor of all is that people are saying they do not see the benefits of being online.

**Q3 Lord Pickles:** Finally, if there was a key message on what the Government and local government had to do to ease that, what would it be?

**Douglas White:** I am happy to jump in, if no one else wants to take it. I am sure others will have clear views as well. My one pitch would be that this is a systemic issue that needs to be given due priority and due status. That requires resourcing, but it also requires an understanding of how this fits across the whole range of different issues which all tiers of government, and the third sector, are interested in.

We are talking in this inquiry about digital inclusion and well-being. That feels absolutely the right place to be locating it. We should not see digital as niche or silo, or one part of someone's life. It is systemic and applies across a whole range of social and economic issues that government may be working on.

Therefore, the pitch from me would be: how do we get focus and interest in digital inclusion embedded across all aspects of government, all departments, all the ways in which we work with and support people? How is every type of intervention that we make thinking about the digital aspects of it and how we include people digitally? How do we give it the status, resource and priority that it needs if we are to tackle these quite complex, multi-layered issues?

**Helen Milner:** Particularly in answer to the question about local authorities, at the Good Things Foundation we work with thousands of local community organisations. In early March, it was 5,000. We currently have 5,000 still on our books, and 1,300 of those organisations are open or operating online.<sup>1</sup>

One thing that Covid has definitely taught us—I think Martha picked on this at the beginning—is that necessity is the mother of invention. Thousands of the organisations we have been working with have worked out how to support people with very few or no online skills to learn how to use the internet better or to use the internet for the first time with no face-to-face support and only remote support. That local community infrastructure is important.

Before March, I would probably be mostly talking about the power of the face to face, the power of being supported by people “like me” who fully understand your situation. But now we can talk about that as the power of online; you are supported online but by local organisations.

I completely agree with Douglas, but I would go a step further and say that by embedding it across all your policy areas within local government, you release investment. Digital inclusion has been massively underfunded at central government level but also at local government level. The local community organisations definitely work on the motivation piece; they help on the skills piece and help people to go at the right pace in an informal way, but that does not tackle data and digital poverty. Obviously, there is access in those places when they are open, but Covid has highlighted that having good personal access, for example at home, is now critical for us. The community infrastructure tackles your motivation and skills barriers, but it does not tackle your data and digital poverty barriers.

**Richard Hart:** I agree with Helen and the other witnesses, from what we saw in Leeds. We normally have about 85,000 users a year of the public-access PCs in our libraries, but with lockdown the community could not access them for five or six months, so 85,000 people who might normally class themselves as digitally included to a degree—they have skills and access to equipment—suddenly had no access. Obviously for a library service it is very important to get the buildings back up and running and allow people to continue to use them.

On the policy issue, again I agree with Helen. In Leeds, we have tried with the 100% Digital Leeds campaign to push the policy of digital inclusion into every other policy that comes out, so that they all have a digital element in them, whether they are related to children or the economic development strategy.

Q4 **The Chair:** We have jumped quickly into quite detailed questions, and it might be helpful if we got more of a background or landscape-setting picture from our witnesses for a couple of minutes. I am interested in

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<sup>1</sup> The witness subsequently clarified that the figure is 1,600

getting a sense of your assessment of the current levels of digitisation. You mentioned that a million children have access to only a smartphone, and you are aware that 9% of households do not have access and so on.

Would anybody like to comment on the affordability of equipment, the pace of broadband—the real pace as opposed to the brainwashing we sometimes get from BT—and some of the more detailed levels of additional skills and different age groups? Perhaps you would like to comment, Ian, from your Ofcom perspective. That will be immensely helpful, and then we can come back to the more detailed questions.

**Q5** **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** My question, which you may want to include in your general question, is this. Our witnesses have been very helpful. How different would your assessments have been if we had never heard of Covid-19—or would they have been the same, with long-term trends in the sort of areas that Martha is asking about?

**Ian Macrae:** On the question about what difference Covid and lockdown have made, we see accelerating trends that were already becoming evident. People's reliance on the internet to communicate with each other was very evident. During lockdown, there was more than a doubling of the number of people making videocalls, and a very large number of people, including a lot of older people, made videocalls for the first time.

There was also a change in the way we seek information. For example, the reach of GOV.UK increased very significantly in March. It has since gone down a little bit. From memory, I think its reach was about 15 million in January and February. It went up to about 28 million and has now settled at about 20 million. People are using online services much more.

We know about the growth of online shopping and online banking; Lloyds Bank reported that the number of over-70s who had signed up for online banking had tripled. From an entertainment point of view, we know that there are about 12 million new subscriptions to online subscription video services. There are very significant changes to the way in which people are using services, and there is a real acceleration of trends that we had seen before. That is the impact.

To set the landscape a little bit, I will talk first about the availability of broadband services. We know that over 95% of the population has access to superfast broadband—that is, speeds of 30 megabits per second or higher—which is sufficient for pretty much every mainstream activity that people do on the internet. The very large majority have access to what we call decent broadband—10 megabits per second—which is required under the USO for broadband. About 600,000 properties still do not have access to that. There are means through the USO, but that is a whole other discussion.

At the high end, ultrafast broadband—300 megabits-plus per second—is available to around 60% of households, I believe, but of course take-up is much lower. The take-up of superfast broadband is around two-thirds of people who have broadband, which is about 56% of all households.

Given that availability is at 95%, the question is how you can drive take-up. From an availability point of view, there are areas where availability is not sufficient, but broadly speaking there has been a lot of investment, and availability is pretty good. Take-up trails a bit behind.

On performance, the analysis that we have seen has generally showed that the UK's networks have stood up pretty well during lockdown. We saw slowdowns in speeds of 1% to 2% during peak usage times in March and April.

I shared earlier some of the demographics of take-up. Older people are most like to be digitally excluded, but so are those in DE households and those with disabilities. We have also done some analysis of those who are financially vulnerable and find that that is the case as well.

Skills to get online are not seen as the main barrier to take-up by many—I believe it is about 10%. We find that, overall, about 90% of the people who are on the internet say they have confidence in using it, but that falls off particularly with older people.

**The Chair:** Helen, did you want to add anything to that? I know you have a very good, wide-ranging knowledge of this.

**Helen Milner:** Definitely. Going back to the background piece and something that Douglas said earlier, it is about making sure that we understand that this is not binary. The language that we use at the Good Things Foundation is “non-users” and “limited users”. A limited user is somebody who has some skills and may or may not have access but cannot do everything that we in the UK say you should be able to do.

From a framework point of view, we are quite lucky that in the UK we have a framework for essential digital skills for life and work. That has been agreed by the Government and is now owned by the Department for Education. It is for adults. A lot of the survey work, particularly the Lloyds Consumer Digital Index survey, uses that framework.

Another bit of background. In August, providers launched the Essential Digital Skills entitlement, which put essential digital skills on the same level as literacy and numeracy—maths and English. That means that any adult who does not have that level of skill can get training for free with it leading to getting a qualification. Anybody who does not want a qualification or does not believe they can achieve a qualification cannot take part in that funded provision. But it is important to have that as part of the background.

Going to Baroness Jay's point about Covid, I have been working in digital inclusion for a couple of decades, and for me there is the extreme need of people who do not have access to devices, or they have a very cheap old device but cannot afford to top up the mobile data; we are talking about people who literally do not have £10 to buy a top-up for their phone.

That is the need that has come through during COVID. We are working with thousands of organisations and in the heart of communities, and that just came through to us like a tidal wave. Before lockdown was announced, some of our community partners had to close their doors because so many people were flooding in in anticipation of the lockdown. The demand but also the levels of digital and data poverty were so much higher than I had previously believed.

From our analysis, we think that since Covid began we have two audiences now. One is people in the extreme need who need devices and data, and they are not only the people with limited skills. Some of them are people who have never been on the internet before at all; 29% of the thousands of people we have supported since March have never used the internet before and they have been supported remotely. So the first audience is people in extreme need and in poverty.

The second group is people learning online. We have online learning platforms. Learn My Way is our biggest online learning platform. All this is free, and we have seen a huge variety of people use it. There have been 49,000 additional people learning, year on year, on Learn My Way and on our other platform, Make It Click in May and June this year. When we did survey work with them, they were employed people who did not know how to work from home and were just being told to work from home. There were people on furlough worried about their digital skills or people who were unemployed who had not realised that digital skills would be so critical for them. When I say "digital skills" I am still talking about that very basic stuff: how to send an email, how to search on the internet, how to put an attachment on an email, the basics of keeping yourself safe online. We know that there are 13.6 million people in our workforce in the UK today who have essential digital skills for life but not for work, so they do not have the basic digital skills they need for work.

On well-being, data came out just before lockdown showing that 87% of people valued using the internet to connect with friends and family, and 44% managed their physical and mental health online. When we did survey work with people we helped during the first lockdown, managing mental and physical health came up strongly at around 50%. Accessing health information and accessing online shopping came up strongly, but the one that absolutely rocketed was connection with other people, with friends and family. That was around 87%—way higher. Every single person said that they needed support with devices or skills because they absolutely needed them for their well-being for connection with other people. Again, I was very surprised by that, but I thought it was an important finding.

**The Chair:** That is very interesting and absolutely the area we are looking at, social interaction being such an important piece of well-being. Thank you. Douglas, do you want to make a point?

**Douglas White:** I will make three small additions to the points that have been made already. The point about barriers is that most people who are digitally excluded—absolutely accepting that that is not a binary term—

who do not make maximum use of the internet, face multiple barriers to maximising their use. While some barriers might be greater than others for different people, most people who are offline will face multiple barriers of motivation, skills and costs, so we need to address that in a joined-up way.

Costs often do not come through strongly as a very significant barrier for very large numbers of people. But they are a barrier for those on low incomes. We did a piece of work a few years ago where we spoke to people in Glasgow who do not use the internet. One of the questions we asked them was: how much do you spend a month on communication services generally? The average spend was £26 or £27. We asked a similar demographic group in the city who do use the internet how much they spent on communication activities each month, and the answer was still under £40. At that time, the UK average household spend per month, from Ofcom data, was nearly £100, so there is a wide divide there. Cost is a big issue for some people, and we have to think about that.

My final point is about skills and perceptions of skills. This applies across different population groups. When people are asked about their perception of digital skills it often does not marry with where their skill levels may be.

We did some work previously with young people and they in particular tended to over-assess their digital skills, partly because they felt that they were expected to have those digital skills and partly because the skills they were thinking about related to, say, Snapchat but not to the skill of uploading a LinkedIn profile or things in the digital skills framework. The question is what type of skills people are asked about and how people's perceptions marry up to where they are.

**Q6** **Baroness Benjamin:** I have two questions about provision and accessibility. The first one picks up on something Ian has said. Do you think we need more subsidised or low-cost IT equipment, such as Raspberry Pi 4, which only requires a TV as a monitor? More long term, should the Government be investing in free satellite-based broadband, especially in rural areas, and for people with income from lower paid jobs and people from minority backgrounds who cannot afford the equipment that is needed, as you all said, especially Douglas?

**Helen Milner:** Should there be subsidised access? Yes. Also, it is important to understand that the Government are already subsidising our fibre broadband service. They have invested billions of pounds in subsidising the provision of broadband infrastructure for internet users, for example, but they are not subsidising it for non-users.

On the specific examples, we have now supported over 10,000 people with a low-cost tablet that costs about £100. If we can, we source tablets which you put a SIM directly into, so we are using mobile data because that is fast. Obviously, that is an emergency response. Let us try to get people equipment and access to the internet as quickly as possible. There

is new low-cost equipment on the market, and that is what we are using. It is definitely adequate for the people we are supporting.

We should be providing free broadband. Between us all, Douglas and Ofcom, we should be working out who cannot afford internet at home and we should be looking at subsidising that. The Good Things Foundation is calling for the Government or someone to establish what we are calling a Data Poverty Lab, because we believe that data poverty is real. It affects about 2 million people in the UK. Creating a lab where we could put the problems on the table and look at innovative solutions, including the two that Baroness Benjamin mentioned, is the way we can tackle this.

I do not think it is appropriate that we have people in this country who are excluded from the benefits of digital, from jobs, from being able to apply for benefits, and from being in contact with their work coaches because they cannot afford it. But I do not think there is a single solution to this. That is why we are calling for a data poverty lab, because it is about public-private, and particularly the charity sector and the telecoms companies coming together to work out sustainable solutions to tackle this. Although providing low-cost tablets with SIM cards in them has definitely been the right solution for an emergency response, we should be looking to tackle data poverty for the long term.

**Q7** **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** Back to my original question, I was interested when you all said that Covid had demonstrated enormous inequalities in digital provision and skills, and so on. Would you go so far as to say that a silver lining of the pandemic has been that you have begun to work to reduce those inequalities? It has stimulated good work and enabled you to improve the situation, which would not have happened if the pandemic had not occurred.

**Helen Milner:** I am afraid I am hogging, but I will jump in and say, yes, there is possibly a silver lining. We were doing lots of things beforehand, but the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated digital exclusion. We found an increase in motivation, so the fact that we can help thousands of people who have never used the internet before without face-to-face support shows that people realise that this is something that they wanted to do. We think that we have seen an increase in motivation.

During the first lockdown, we worked with FutureDotNow, which put DevicesDotNow in place, and the support that we got from the private sector in providing funding as well as devices and connectivity was high. The awareness that digital exclusion is an issue that we need to tackle is definitely a silver lining. The question now is how we make sure that we continue to work on it. When the pandemic is over, this problem will still be there, so we need to look for sustainable solutions and to make sure that we are working cross-sectorally, but that does not mean that government is off the hook.

**Douglas White:** I echo that. It has provided a moment for raising awareness of digital inclusion. It has exposed and exacerbated issues and

it has then raised awareness of those issues beyond the set of organisations that would normally be interested in working on them.

The opportunity lies in moving beyond what at the moment is often our crisis response to the pandemic in order to help people to get digitally included, which is important. How do we take that opportunity? How do we address the systemic issues and keep that level of awareness and embed it across the system, so that in future pandemics, the climate crisis and so on we do not have to act in an emergency way but have a much more digitally resilient population and we are much more geared up. That is the moment we have, and it is why this inquiry is so important in building in that future forecast.

**The Chair:** Lola has more detailed questions about digital exclusion in different sectors of society.

**Q8 Baroness Young of Hornsey:** Thanks to all our guests this morning. This is really helpful. I want to tease out some of the points that you have made and intersect them with some of the points that we wish to cover in a bit more detail.

I am particularly interested in how you unpack some of these excluded groups. We accept that some groups are more likely to be excluded from this piece than others, yet we also recognise that there are big differences between, and intersections across, those groups. It is quite a complex scene, and I am glad that people have already pointed to the fact that one should not only not be binary but not think about binarisms in this case. I am interested in what happens when you unpack some of the groups that we continually refer to as being excluded. That is one question.

Following on from that, do we need different strategies for dealing with that, and, if so, what are some of them? Also, this may be a deficiency in my reading so far, but I have not heard much talk of literacy or language and what the barriers are for different communities.

A second question, which occurred to me following something Helen said, is: what are the essential digital skills? Even if so many people move to an online life, as we are seeing increasingly, there are still skills that you might need, beyond the actual practical technological, to be able to interact effectively, for example with a doctor online. Might we need to rethink or revisit the notion of essential digital skills and broaden that out slightly?

Finally, are there examples of quick wins here, whether resource-led or whatever, in getting a significant number of people up to speed on digital skills? Also, have you noted any international examples of the same things? I am particularly interested in countries such as Africa that do not have the same economic resources to which we have access. In Africa, that has been a huge problem.

Sorry if that is a bit long-winded, but there are three questions there which anybody can answer or address. Thank you.

**Richard Hart:** How do you impact the groups? In Leeds, with the support of the Good Things Foundation, we have been working with community groups to identify their needs, so going directly into the community. We are trying to do that with a “furthest first” approach, which is the term we often find ourselves using.

I work in the library sector. We have 34 libraries in Leeds with 700 public-access PCs. That is part of the universal offer, so anybody can come into the library and get support with skills there. But there are some organisations and communities that do not readily access the library provision for a whole host of different reasons. We work directly with individual organisations, which might be community elders groups dealing with older people, organisations supporting ESOL, refugees and asylum seekers, homeless people. All those different organisations have their own communities of clients.

We are able to extend working with the organisation into working with the individual to assess their individual needs. If somebody is older, the age itself is not the barrier. There might be an associated disability or a language barrier. It then comes down to a much more tailored approach with each individual.

**Helen Milner:** The intersectionality point is well made. But when you look at the layers of data, a lot of it boils down to income and educational attainment. We focus our work on the more excluded communities, as we know that the demand and the need is so much higher there.

In some desk research that we did—we support around 250,000 people a year in normal times; that is a model that is operating at scale—we found that around 50% of them self-declare a disability, and we know that disabled people are also much more likely to be digitally excluded. There are clearly interventions that we make. Back to our model, we work with a network of local community organisations. I call it “a big club with a shared vision” to help you get the spirit of “We’re all in it together” and to try to reach, engage and support people who are digitally excluded.

That offer is tailored at a local level, but people with disabilities are also in the general population, so we are supporting them with our generic offer. We are looking at whether there is anything we can do to train the staff and volunteers in our network to help them to support people with disabilities more and with the devices offer, thinking about the next level up. I am not talking about very specialised equipment, but the hardware and software, particularly free software, for people who have disabilities who we can support. Again, that is one of the quick wins.

That community offer is so important. It deals with the language issue a lot, because our local community partners speak multiple languages, and they speak the languages of the communities they are in. All the learning content of Learn My Way, our online learning platform, is at a reading age of nine or lower to tackle illiteracy. Obviously, the simpler it is, the better it is for everybody. We also have text to speech, so it reads to you, and if you cannot read you can also follow that content.

Those are two ways in which we have been tackling the issue of language, because we know that there are those underlying issues in the communities that we are working in.

I have already mentioned the community network and supporting about 250,000 people a year, but during Covid we have learned how to do this online a lot more. We have a programme funded by RB, the health and hygiene commercial group, looking at digital health hubs, as we are calling them. We were funded by the NHS for three years until March this year, where we piloted this digital health hub model, and we are now doing that with RB funding.

We are creating communities of practice for digital inclusion and health or digital health literacy. There are five or six different digital health hubs<sup>2</sup>: community centres supporting people with digital health literacy around the country, and they are coming together to share practice but also to see if they can support people remotely together. One community of practice is on older people and the other is on Black, Asian and minority ethnic people. We started doing that because of Covid, which has taken the prevalence of the need to bring people together online much higher up the agenda. We are looking at that as a way of supporting people.

One thing I am sure the UK Government would say is that the internet is very affordable in the UK. In Africa, given a lot of the ways in which the internet is rolled out, affordability is a massive issue. For me, the international example that I look at, because it is very different from ours, is Google Fiber in the USA. Google is putting fibre internet into communities and providing it for free to anchor organisations like libraries and other significant charities in the area, as well as looking at a much cheaper starter pack, so we are talking about social tariffs here.

Google Fiber is making the internet much more affordable at the bottom end, because it is doing it across a whole neighbourhood. It then takes some of the money it is making and, working with the mayor of that municipality, is creating an additional inclusion fund for the local community organisations to use. It feels like a very holistic model that provides affordable or free internet for key anchor organisations and has some funding for digital inclusion. That is the one that I look at and admire the most.

**Douglas White:** I have three points on the different questions; they are good and interesting questions. First, on particular groups and intersections, we have argued that a co-production approach is important to doing that. We do not think about people or communities in the boxes we might put them in or the labels we might put on them, but we understand them as individuals in communities with multiple intersecting interests and preferences.

We need a grass-roots approach where we work with individuals in communities and crucially with the organisations that are working and

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<sup>2</sup> The witness subsequently clarified that there are 15

supporting them for long periods of time. Understanding those digital exclusion issues and how they can best be addressed, because the issues and solutions will be different in different places, is critical to achieving a system-wide and co-production approach. Working with communities and grass-roots organisations feels essential.

On the intersection of skills, we talked about access and affordability in the sense that digital exclusion is affected by costs and the things that people can afford do not exist in isolation from all the other costs that people might have pressing on them. The same applies to skills, and if people have digital skill needs there will also be skill challenges in other areas. Then the challenging question for digital inclusion interventions is: do you want to go fairly narrow and tackle the digital skill needs only but not on some of the other skill challenges that people may have; or do you want to make a more holistic but probably longer-term intervention to tackle all those skills challenges, or a number of those skill challenges, within a whole series of different interventions? There will be different approaches and there will be examples of each that have worked well.

Finally, on other interventions that are making a difference, Members may be aware of Connecting Scotland. Since lockdown, the Scottish Government have announced over £40 million of investment for 50,000 school children<sup>3</sup> in Scotland who are digitally excluded. So national government and the programme, which is operated through local authorities and third-sector organisations within local authorities, and perhaps also the public sector within local authorities, are working to provide devices, connectivity and support to help people get online with support from a digital champion. We are in early stages of that being rolled out and deployed, and we are waiting for evaluation data on how it has gone so far.

This has been an important intervention with regard to quite significant skills in Scotland, which offers an interesting model of how different tiers—the public sector, the third sector, and business, which has also been heavily involved—can work together to achieve change in a short space of time.

**Ian Macrae:** I want to build on Baroness Young's second question about skills and set out that there is clearly a range of different skills and lots of different aspects of digital exclusion that go beyond access to the internet, certain devices, or even the basic skills of sending an email and making an attachment. Our media literacy research explores that, and I will highlight some things.

It is complex being on the internet. It is much harder than watching television. Recognising an advert on television, for example, is easy. On the internet, it is a lot more difficult. Our research finds that about four in 10 people do not recognise an advert on Google, despite the fact that it has a sponsored ad message next to it.

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<sup>3</sup> The witness subsequently clarified that the funding is for 50,000 households, rather than 50,000 children

Managing personal data is a very difficult media literacy skill, and we think that people overestimate their confidence in doing that. Fundamentally, the issue of skills to protect themselves online needs addressing, not only protecting themselves from online scams but protecting them from harmful online content and recognising misinformation. There is a whole level of skills that we need to think about through digital literacy at all stages that goes far beyond what we might think of as being basic levels of internet use.

**The Chair:** Thank you. Many of my colleagues have been very interested in the topic of increased levels of fraud and other potential downsides to increased reliance.

We move on now to questions from Toby that perhaps look a bit more to the longer term and move to digital inclusion for everybody post-pandemic. I remind colleagues that we have only about 45 minutes left, so questions and answers need to be brief. I know there is a huge amount to cover and this is all valuable stuff, but it would be immensely helpful if people were as succinct as possible.

**Q9 Lord Harris of Haringey:** Thank you to the witnesses for a series of very interesting and insightful comments. Quite a lot of what I wanted to ask about has been touched on and what I wanted to get at: what are the practical processes of moving from a nation and a world where large numbers are, in practice, digitally excluded to one where everyone is digitally included?

Some of what you have described are long-term issues and some are short term. What can we do in the short term, given where we are with the Covid lockdown? Rather than ask you to retrieve all that, it would be helpful if you came back to us with your ask list to deliver digital inclusion with what you see as being the most important thing to do and the next two or three beyond that. That would be very useful for us to pull together to see whether it makes sense.

I want to ask about the group of people who do not wish to be digitally engaged for whatever reasons. It was probably Ian who gave us the information about a high proportion of people who are not interested at the moment or do not want it. Then there is the "do not have skills" and those who do not feel safe. Within all that there will be people who have deep uncertainties about this. They feel that they are exposing themselves on the internet. I am interested in your perception of how significant an issue that is and, secondly, what should be done to try to overcome that.

**Helen Milner:** It is a good question. I have been saying quite a lot about it not being binary. Quite often, if I am in the media and imply that lots of older people do not use the internet, I get letters from older people who say that lots of them do.

Recently I got a letter from an older chap who did not use the internet and was perfectly happy. He described to me why he was so happy; it was because his children did his online shopping for him, bought his flights for him, helped him buy house insurance. He saw himself as being

a highly functioning member of society because he did a lot of things himself. He could still drive, he went to the local shops, he had an active social life, but his family was underpinning it; they were providing the benefits of the internet for him. He said, "I don't need to be on the internet, because I have a lovely life and other people are helping me to do some of those things". He did not quite understand the irony of saying that to me.

We find that a lot of the people we support in our network have lost a spouse recently, and their spouse, normally a husband, was the one who did everything on the internet. Usually a wife had been perfectly happy for all those things to be going on, but when she lost her spouse she needed to get those skills.

Sometimes it is about life stage, but a number of other witnesses have talked about making sure that we look at the underlying worries that people have. They think, "People like me can't do this kind of thing". If you have no qualifications and you left school more than 20 years ago, you may be worried that you won't be able to learn something new. People are also worried about the cost. One woman said to me: "I do not really want to learn how to use the internet, because I know I will probably like it but I cannot afford it". Then, thinking about security, there is a lot in the media about how bad the internet is, how dangerous it is, how people have their identity stolen, have their bank accounts emptied. There is a lot of negative media that we also need to combat by saying that we can help you not only to do it but to learn how to do it.

We need to pick all those things off, because there is no simple solution. We need to make sure that people feel comfortable; that they can do it; that they can have good role models like digital champions in their 90s, which we have at the Good Things Foundation. There are plenty of stories of how people have gone from not knowing it to being able to do it. But it is also absolutely about making sure that a helping hand is there for very real things like worrying about fraud on the internet or people being nasty to them, those kinds of worries. We need to make sure that we take those worries seriously and address them in our interventions to support them.

**Douglas White:** It is a really important question. There is something about just recognising that some people will not want to go online for lots of perfectly legitimate reasons, and that is absolutely fine. The question, therefore, is in what situations those people feel they may be obliged or required to go online and it becomes almost less of a choice. What actions are we taking to support people to get the outcomes they need but may feel they have been driven to mainly through online? How do they get access to those outcomes in a different way, and how does that online provision interact with other forms of provision? That is a really challenging set of questions.

We have to keep this in mind as we move through, particularly as digital inclusion is not binary. It is also not static; the skills we need to be effectively digitally engaged change all the time. So that question

becomes more and more pertinent as we move forward, as the range of skills people require to be effectively digitally engaged become more and more sophisticated. That is important to bear in mind now and for the future.

Secondly, we need to think about tackling digital exclusion, and not about the onus being all on individuals. We need to think about the support networks that are around them. How are the digital skills of the organisations and services, friends and family they engage with? How are we supporting people in lots of different ways to have the confidence and the patience to have the skills? What is the support network around people? It is not about the onus being on individuals.

Related to that, it is about what the digital world that we are inviting and encouraging people to be a part of looks like and what other action is required to make that a safer place. That is where things like the planned regulation to tackle online harm have become so important. We have to think about it holistically and systemically and not just about individuals trying to navigate their own way into this complex and challenging world.

**Richard Hart:** I have a quick point to make about the practical process of making more people aware. For me, it is about all organisations embedding a conversation about digital in what they do, such as working with a community group—it might be a knitting group—the conversation you can get out of that, and patterns online. It goes back to what Helen was talking about. Lots of people have a thing they are interested in; there was the example of somebody getting their flights booked for them by somebody else. There is a digital need there, or at least a digital motivation, and it is about drawing that out of the individuals.

**The Chair:** When I was a digital champion in the UK looking at issues of digital exclusion, I reflected with a group of women that by far and away the thing that encouraged them to get online the most was not quite knitting but flower arranging. I went to this amazing local church group where women had decided that they were going to become leaders and win all the competitions, and it was flower arranging that had prompted them to want to be able to use the internet—exactly to that point.

Q10 **Baroness Chisholm of Owlpen:** I want to ask each of you about digital exclusion and children. We know that the pandemic has heightened the educational divide. As we saw during the first lockdown, children from better-off households spent 30% more time each day on educational activities than children from the poorest households. This is obviously leading to an increase in educational inequality. We also find that most of these issues were mainly exacerbated by challenges with access to technology and connectivity.

Going forward, clearly digital skills at school will be very important as we find that disadvantaged groups are most at risk, with half of those in the low socioeconomic groups having no training in digital skills after they leave school. What interventions do you think are required to address

these problems?

**Richard Hart:** I can give an example of some work we did during the summer. Leeds already operates a tablet lending scheme. A variety of authorities do that now, but generally these are aimed at adults for employment and so on. During the summer, because of the issues that you have raised, as part of our Healthy Holidays healthy eating programme, where we were sending out food packages and getting referrals for children, we also sent out tablets to the families who were most in need.

We had asked in a survey in the referral process whether they had internet connection at home and a device they could use. Through that, we targeted 100 families with a device and sent them very simple instructions on how to get online and access our services. We were able to engage with them in things like our cultural offer on YouTube, Lego clubs and coding, that kind of thing. It is a snapshot of what is possible with some funding, rather than something that would be provided at scale everywhere. But it will at least allow targeted intervention with some of the most in need.

**Helen Milner:** Like Richard, most of our work is with adults, but in our work now we are providing devices and data to families. It is a good area to explore further, because, as Ian said, the number of children who live in households without any internet is quite small, but it goes up to 1.9 million for children in households with mobile only. The children in households that do not have the internet or have mobile only will also be living in the very poorest households.

Coming back to the point about the intersectionality between social exclusion and digital exclusion, those children are already going to be behind the opportunities. The Social Mobility Commission has written a report about Covid-19 that includes digital inclusion, so I would highlight that to the Committee as well.

**Douglas White:** As we have discussed, the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated issues that existed previously. It mattered before that some people did not have access or had insufficient access to internet at home and that had negative implications for the ability to engage on an equal basis at school. The pandemic exposed and exacerbated that, so clearly action is required to tackle that. Through the years, we have talked about a number of other interventions: the provision of devices, the provision of connectivity where that is required, and perhaps the provision of support to help people get the skills required to make the most of the devices and connectivity provided.

There is also, particularly in the education sector, a question about whether schools and teachers need more advice, support and guidance on digital safeguarding and on how to use that technology to make sure that children's increased experience of using technology to engage in education is safe and it is clear where different responsibilities lie. There is an additional set of requirements for that setting.

Q11 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** This question is related to this. I quite understand if our panel feel that they are not the appropriate people to answer, but I think we should put it on the record.

Do you feel that there should be much more formal education in digital skills in schools? For example, would it be sensible to put it into the national curriculum?

**Douglas White:** I am not an educationalist, so my remarks are qualified by that caveat, but, as with a whole range of core skills like literacy and numeracy, I think there will be a series of questions to ask. Where do you set those skills in the curriculum as a specific set of things, which I am sure is important? Also, how do you embed it across the curriculum so that people develop their digital skills as they undertake the other subjects that they are engaging in? That whole point is the one we made right at the outset of the session: how we think about this in a systemic, holistic way.

**Helen Milner:** It seems bizarre that we have an Essential Digital Skills framework and a qualifications programme for adults but not for children. The minute you leave school you could lack the essential digital skills which the Department for Education already has deemed to be a minimum level for adults. Embedding that same framework for schools and children would seem to be a very sensible thing to do.

**Douglas White:** You then have to think about how that support network plays out in teacher training and how teachers of all subjects, using their own digital skills, are embedding digital in their own lessons and across the curriculum.

**The Chair:** I could not agree more with that fundamental point. John, we have covered some areas relating to the pandemic, but are there additional questions that you would like to ask the panel?

Q12 **Lord Alderdice:** Yes, you are quite right, Martha. Thank you very much indeed to our presenters, because some of the questions we started with have already been picked up and answered. Ian and Helen have said helpful things, for example, about whether the pandemic has prompted more people to try to get online and get support online, and whether it has changed what it means to be digitally excluded.

The question I would like us to come back to is also the main thrust of the Committee's work, which is to look at the impact not in the period of Covid-19 but subsequently. You have pointed out a number of things that have been a problem during the period of Covid-19, such as social isolation. We all desperately hope it will not be too long before we are able to physically meet people again. There are, however, some things that have been accelerated by Covid-19 and are permanent changes in the way we manage ourselves as a society and so on.

Could you tease out a little bit the things that have changed because of Covid-19 and which we may go back to dealing with more directly, to some extent at least, and the much more permanent changes that have been accelerated by Covid-19 but were probably going to happen

anyway? It is a bit of a mixed picture. There are lots of people who have come to the use of digital through video and are now getting rather tired of it and finding out there are all sorts of problems with it. There are lots of people who came on to Facebook and are no longer posting so much on it.

That is some of the downside. There is the whole question of relating with doctors who have to see their patients online at the moment and it is not always proving as satisfactory as some people had hoped.

The main question is: what are the things that are to do with lockdown but that will reduce, if not remit back, and what acceleration of permanent changes do we need to address as a society?

**The Chair:** It is important to distinguish between the here and now and the long term, as John has said. It is very difficult sometimes to put our minds to defining those, which is why our Committee is trying to help think about recommendations.

**Helen Milner:** It is a very interesting area of questioning, because the pandemic has not caused digital exclusion but has exposed and exacerbated it. Whether or not saying that we need quicker, faster action on digital inclusion is valid and answers your question, I do not know, but, on that specific point, the Lloyds Consumer Digital Index this year, 2020, said that in 10 years' time we will reduce the number of people with very low essential digital skills only from one third now to 25% in 2030.

This is a very deep-seated problem, and although there are many organisations, including the witnesses here today, doing a lot of work and reaching a lot of people, reaching millions and millions of people needs a much more accelerated set of interventions at scale to make sure that we are not here again.

I want to mention two permanent changes. One is the acceleration of public services online. Matt Hancock has said that he expects GPs to carry on doing video consultations after the pandemic is over, that is an improvement to the health system and some people are saying they are getting better access to GPs by being able to do video consultations—and phone consultations.

It is not just the private sector where that acceleration has happened but the public sector too. We need to be minded of that particularly when it comes to health and work, but we also know that there have been a lot of issues with people having access to the justice system. A lot of money is being spent on improving public service by making it predominantly online. Obviously, if they are essential services, they cannot for ever be 100% online, but I think it is a really important public policy point. These innovations and improvements have been prompted and driven by Covid-19, and some of the changes will be there permanently.

The second change is in the world of work. I am a charity. We employ about 100 people in the UK and we are all home-based. We will not go back to the office in the same way as we did before. We will expect people to work from home. In March and April, we had people using our services who had been told to work from home using their own devices. They had never done any video calling or used online project management software before. People were being told to work from home and were not provided with those skills by their employer. If we think about the million-plus people we will have unemployed, the world of work will have to change and it will be essential that companies and charities can use online tools.

Those are two changes which I think answer your question.

**Douglas White:** Living through a pandemic is unprecedented in our lifetime, but so will be coming out the other side, hopefully soon. Therefore, we want to monitor very tightly how that affects peoples' lives as we move through, and clearly the work of this inquiry is to understand that. Finding ongoing sources of data to monitor and understand that will be critically important, so that we can determine ongoing trends, rather than at particular points in time, and assess them. We do not know what the volatility of this journey out of the pandemic might look like over the next year or two. Having really good data to continually inform our understanding is something that we should be pressing for and asking for across all different dimensions of well-being.

**Lord Alderdice:** The point that Helen makes is absolutely reasonable; her charity is now working exclusively online, and people are operating from home and are not working from the office. Two issues emerge from that that are not in areas that we have talked about. One is the problem of managing a group of people and the impoverishment socially of an organisation where people almost never meet each other other than online, and the implications of that.

Secondly, if a lot of people work from home—of course, there are lots of people who cannot work from home because of the nature of their job—that has implications for their home. It has implications for the style and design of their home, and for the space they have at home, including whether partners or other members of the family are also working from home.

There is a series of other issues—of property and home, and so on—that were relieved by people being able to go out during the day but which will be made worse by them not being able to go out or by them having to go out. That is different when it is short term. Okay, we are stuck here for the pandemic, but what happens in the medium to long term is another matter entirely.

Q13 **Baroness Benjamin:** We talked about adults, but one of my big concerns is about children. We know that children are already spending a lot of time online and that now with Covid-19 there is even more time for them to be spending online. The Internet Watch Foundation, for instance,

has reported a huge increase in the number of children who are being groomed and encouraged to film their own abuse and put it online.

What do we need to do to help children with their mental well-being and to help them to cope with being online the amount of time they will have to be, and to protect vulnerable children in particular, who feel that being online is a way of finding friends, because they probably do not feel very confident or important because of how they are being groomed?

What do we need to do to help children cope with being online for the amount of time they will have to be? They will also see their parents online. Will the parents be neglecting them? How much time will the parents have for them? All those things that affect what will happen to our children in the future really worry me.

**The Chair:** I remind witnesses that we are looking at the excluded part of the puzzle at the minute, particularly in answer to Floella's question about new users being excluded and the charges in bringing new users on. I will move afterwards to a set of questions from Peter about more practical and specific policy recommendations. Would anyone like to comment on Floella or John's questions?

**Helen Milner:** I think this line of questioning is showing that we do not know a lot yet. There is a very rich seam of research here, and bearing in mind that we are focused on excluded people—children and adults who had no or low digital skills before the pandemic but who have now come online and used those skills—the question is how we make sure that there is a balance. What are we learning about how we make sure that interventions, support and skills are provided in the right way, online as well as offline? There is quite a lot that we still do not know. In many ways, we can only tell you about the last few months of our experiences and the survey work we have done. The balance between offline and online and what more we need to do with people who are online to help them cope is a new area of research, specifically with regard to the impact of Covid-19.

**The Chair:** Very interesting. Thank you.

**Douglas White:** I echo that. We are still learning a lot. On the point about children and young people, I refer back to the point made earlier about the importance of the support network and thinking about schools, youth charities, parents, and what we are doing to support them to be aware of the benefits that being online can bring children and young people but also of the risks and issues. How are we providing them with the confidence, the tools, the skills to be able to have those conversations with children and young people? Of course, we should be engaging directly with children and young people themselves and finding out what they see as the key issues and what they are most worried about. Going back to my point about co-production, we need to take a very grass-roots approach to understand this.

On the point about working from home, we know that, outside the pandemic, people's relationships with their line manager and their peer

network are two critical functions in the way people experience work and how well-being delivers at work. We need to do more to provide people with advice, support, ideas and guidance on how to do those things differently in an online setting. We have had almost six months of people doing this at scale in the UK, and different organisations and sectors work on it in very different ways. How do we pull all that learning together to help people pick the best ways to work together online and some of the things to avoid? There are loads of resources and ideas of learning out there. The challenge is to put all that together and give it to people.

**The Chair:** That goes to some of the questions we will ask you as we try to get more specific ideas in a final set of pitches from you all about what you would like to get in place. Peter, over to you.

Q14 **Lord Hain:** I am interested in what government and local government, with the help of the third sector, should do. Should there be digital hubs? Richard, those are striking figures on library use. Should that be a universal provision through local authorities? It has to be funded socially. Do we have to use a different type of model for public transport, an Uber model for public transport, to give people greater mobility? Should there be universal iPads with internet access, or do we start with schools, which is not the case at the moment? Should those on benefits—let us use universal credit as a benchmark—get free broadband? Helen raised these issues. Finally, what are other countries doing better than us in addressing this agenda?

**The Chair:** Can I ask that each of you takes this in turn, because this is a final opportunity to give us your best ideas? We promise we will credit you if we steal them.

**Richard Hart:** Probably the easiest questions for me to answer are the first two. Should we have digital hubs? I would say yes. There are already networks of public libraries across the country. Virtually all have public access PCs in them as legacies from the People's Network project introduced probably 15 or 16 years ago. Those PCs are regularly updated. They are available and there are staff in libraries to support members of the community. Also, of course, we link in in instances with the Good Things Foundation for online resources for tutorials such as the Learn My Way which Helen mentioned earlier.

In Leeds, we are already looking at how we take a public library and turn it into something that we might call a digital hub; they are already community hubs, but how do we make them community digital hubs and draw more people in? Currently, on average, only 60% of the slots that are available on our public access PCs are utilised, so there is capacity there to increase their use. For me, it is then about the advocacy of getting more people in, pushing and promoting the service that is available, and the motivations for people to engage.

On universal iPads, or similar, I see a need to increase what is available, but I still see that as probably a targeted provision, maybe targeted to people with broadband, potentially for universal credit or similar

interventions. We would probably look to do that on an individual-needs analysis. If somebody comes into a job club or a Jobcentre and says, "I want to do more work from home in order to apply for jobs", we could lend them a device to do that. Currently, our model is lending devices to organisations that are third-sector communities so that they can work with their clients in settings. I think a blended approach is needed that allows both things to happen in the future.

**Helen Milner:** Should we have hubs? Definitely. We call our "big club" the Online Centres Network; there are thousands of them across the UK already. Building on and investing in that would be tremendous. We have pitched into the spending review what we are calling a Great Digital Catch-up, to support a million people a year in a combination of community networks, plus working with employers, plus supporting those limited users with online learning. We also have the digital health hubs pilot, blending health and well-being for people in communities through the existing network of digital inclusion in our communities, including libraries. So, yes, we should definitely have hubs, but also investment in a catch-up. This is best done nationally, probably in England, because Scotland is already ahead of us in the game.

On the point about free broadband and iPads, as I said earlier, we are calling for a Data Poverty Lab, so we could really say, "Let's set ourselves an ambition. In two years, let's remove data poverty from the UK". There will be a number of solutions; it could be iPads in libraries for loan, or be free broadband for people on Universal Credit. But a very quick solution would be to make sure that people on Universal Credit have an element added to their welfare benefit that is for broadband. At the moment, it is not taken into consideration as a cost that people on Universal Credit might have. Those are some of the ideas. Data gifting is another thing that we are very excited about. We want a data poverty lab to really explore this: "Let's set ourselves a timeline. In two years, let's eradicate data poverty from the UK".

My third recommendation is about the Government. This is a committee of the House of Lords, so let us talk about machineries of government. Digital inclusion sits in DCMS. It is a policy department, not a delivery department. Getting any traction on tackling this extreme need during the pandemic could not be handled at the DCMS, because it does not have any kind of budget for it, but it is good to have cross-government policies. I am still worried that the Government's digital strategy will not have a major section on digital exclusion. That is a very strong recommendation: that the Government must look at digital exclusion in their digital strategy.

Lastly, I know that this Committee will be taking evidence in future sessions about things like work and health. Please remember digital exclusion when you are looking at those elements. As we have said throughout this session, digital exclusion cuts across all those different aspects. Please keep it in the front of your minds when you are taking evidence in other sessions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Helen. I am sure, given the quality of this session, that any points and issues that have been raised will be front of mind for all us. Thank you. Douglas, and then Ian, can you give us your final thoughts?

**Douglas White:** Thank you. I will start in reverse order from Helen, but I have quite similar points. The commitment to tackling digital exclusion has to be absolutely first and foremost, because unless it is, there is a risk that any initiative that may come under will it fall away or will not have the kind of long-term sustainability that we need. We need government at all levels, national and local government, to really take digital exclusion and say, "This is a priority for us. We'll put this in the appropriate place in the digital strategy and in wider anti-poverty strategies across our organisational plan and say, 'This is a big thing. We recognise it, and we'll tackle it. We're in it for the medium to long term in investing in this'". When you have that long-term commitment, you can be in a much more robust and resilient place to deliver a host of different activities.

My second point is to make another pitch for co-production. Once you have sustained commitment at a high policy level, that delivery has to be informed by organisations working on the ground with a whole range of different groups to tackle some of the complexities here, and by working with communities themselves, building that co-production approach into that strategic set of goals.

Then, I absolutely echo two key points Helen made. One is about investment. This area requires investment to make these changes, whether it is for devices, supporting people with connectivity, or helping organisations to deliver digital champions and digital support so that people get the advice and help that they need.

Finally, we need innovation, absolutely. I really support that call as well. We need to think about how we break down some of the things that have been difficult before and think about things in a different way, whether that is data gifting or zero rating on particular websites, and to think creatively about what more we can do in this space. That would be my fourth and final ask.

**The Chair:** Great. Thank you. Finally, Ian.

**Ian Macrae:** Thank you very much. Let me pick up two groups of digitally excluded people. The first is children. One of the most striking findings for me is that 9% of children do not have a computer or a tablet in their homes. I have two children of my own, and I cannot imagine how they would struggle, even outside lockdown, if they did not have good internet access and a computer to do their learning at home. That feels like a fundamental area that should be addressed.

Secondly, at the other end of the age scale, are older people. One of the statistics that really strikes me is that over half of over-70s who live alone do not have internet access, and the consequences of social

exclusion that follow from that. Of course, as more people get included, the consequences are greater for those who are excluded, because they are excluded from their personal networks, but also with things like bank branches potentially closing down. Addressing that through devices, through access, but fundamentally through community support, feels quite fundamental.

Another thing to highlight is that network availability in the UK is pretty good. Services may not be as expensive as many people think. There is benefit in a communications campaign on that. BT, for example, has a social tariff, which people on qualifying benefits are eligible for, for a voice line and broadband connection for just over £10 a month. I am not sure that there is sufficient awareness of that. Similarly, for those who are online, there are benefits in shopping around, getting better deals, and demanding more from their provider. The Stay Connected campaign that Ofcom has been running has been looking at that, including how people can improve their wi-fi performance, for example, which can be a tremendous barrier to participating properly.

One other thing from me to close on is that understanding the impact of Covid and lockdown has been a little bit frustrating for me. Clearly it has been fundamental in changing the way people use communication services, but at Ofcom we do not yet have the evidence base that we probably need. A lot of our best-in-field research relies on face-to-face communication, which is the most robust way of getting it. We have put a few of our trackers on hold, but, just to flag a few things, we will have our technology tracker, our adult's media literacy, our children's media literacy, all going into the field now. That will provide really interesting data sets in the New Year. Similarly, our big annual data collection on the take-up of telecom services through our Connected Nations report will be out in December. I am just letting you know that there is a whole bunch of data that we can make sure comes your way.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. That is very clear. Peter has asked whether you could perhaps submit written evidence about those specific recommendations, if you felt inclined to do so. I am sure that would be extremely helpful. I know that we would love to see that research, Ian, as soon as it is available. John has just made that same point. If that is available while we are doing this inquiry, that would be immensely helpful, too.

I am conscious that we have had a long time. We have covered such a broad range of subjects, and forgive us for dotting around slightly for you guys. The big strands that I take away are, first—going back to Eric's original question about the very deep link between digital exclusion, social exclusion, inequality, and that complex but definitely exaggerated relationship during Covid—your absolute belief that the relative levels of digital understanding or exclusion or skills is a big factor in determining well-being in its broadest sense. You have all mentioned social interactions, quality of work, and mental health, health generally and quality of life. That is also very important for us as a Committee.

Finally, these are complex policy areas, and you are all experts in it, but I feel—and I may be bringing too much of my own personal belief into this—that this is a problem that we can crack in the UK. I think it needs to be made a priority, it needs to be in a government plan, and it needs to be driven and prioritised as part of all our digital work over the next few years. I get a sense from all you that you would all agree with that.

I hope that we can, in some small part, play a role in making that happen, because I know that we all sit here taking for granted our ability to continue our lives with relative ease. It is excruciating to think of people for whom that is not possible. I just cannot imagine having had to survive the last few months, but also in the future, in a world that is increasingly digital.

Thank you very much for helping us to understand the complex landscape. We will indeed keep front of mind all the issues that you have raised as we come into future sessions about work, social life, physical health, mental health, and so on. I really value all your feelings and work, as I know my colleagues do also, so thank you. I will say goodbye to our witnesses now and we will spend a few minutes just talking about what we have learned. Thank you very much. Have a great rest of your day and good luck with the rest of lockdown. I hope you will stay safe and sane, which is perhaps more of a challenge.