HOUSE OF LORDS

Communications and Digital Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Digital exclusion and the cost of living

Tuesday 28 February 2023

2.30 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Stowell of Beeston (The Chair); Baroness Featherstone; Lord Foster of Bath; Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie; Lord Griffiths of Burry Port; Lord Hall of Birkenhead; Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill; Lord Kamall; The Lord Bishop of Leeds; Lord Lipsey; Baroness Wheatcroft.

Evidence Session No. 2 Heard in Public Questions 24 – 36

Witnesses

I: Sally West, Policy Manager, Age UK; Dr Robin Christopherson MBE, Head of Digital Inclusion, AbilityNet; Dr Jake Anders, Associate Professor in Educational and Social Statistics, and Deputy Director, Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, University College London; Patricia Bailey, member, ATD Fourth World UK and APLE Collective.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Sally West, Dr Robin Christopherson, Dr Jake Anders and Patricia Bailey.

Q24 **The Chair:** This is the Communications and Digital Committee. We are continuing our inquiry into digital exclusion during the cost of living issues, where we want to explore whether there are any particular cost of living pressures that are impacting on the matter of digital exclusion, as well as how we can close any divide that remains so that we are in a strong position to continue to pursue economic growth as a society.

Before I ask our witnesses to introduce themselves, I should say that the purpose of this session is predominantly to make sure we have as good an understanding as possible of the problems in this area that we are seeking to address. Without further ado, could I ask the witnesses to introduce themselves? I start with Dr Christopherson, who is joining us online.

Dr Robin Christopherson: I am head of digital inclusion at the UK technology and disability charity, AbilityNet.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I will go along the panel now.

Patricia Bailey: I am a member of an organisation called ATD Fourth World. ATD is an anti-poverty organisation. I am also involved with Addressing Poverty with Lived Experience—or APLE. That is who I am representing today.

The Chair: Thank you very much. You are very welcome.

Dr Jake Anders: I am an associate professor at UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities.

Sally West: I am a policy manager at Age UK.

The Chair: That is great. We have people who can talk to us about people in the context of social mobility and opportunities for the young, older age people, people with disabilities, and also the socially and economically disadvantaged. We have four categories of questions, which will cover the demographic groups that I have just described and the impact of exclusion on them and the opportunities lost. We will then move on to solutions and, finally, who should take the lead or be most responsible for addressing those issues or coming forward with solutions. I am going to hand over now to Bishop Nick to get us started.

Q25 **The Lord Bishop of Leeds:** Whenever we talk about digital exclusion, we move very quickly between anecdote and data or fact. We have heard there are certain groups in society who are more likely to be digitally excluded than others, and for a host of reasons: affordability of connectivity, access, educational status and so on. Can you speak, from your own context and interests, about where you think digital exclusion is focused? What are the categories and factors that you think are most important? Could we start with Sally, please?

Sally West: There are a number of interrelated issues as to why older people are digitally excluded. If you ask people, one of the first things they are likely to say is something like, "Oh, it's not for me. It's not something that I'm interested in. It's not something that I need in my life." That lack of motivation is one reason. Very closely linked to that are digital skills. People will then say, "Well, I couldn't manage that. It's too difficult. I don't know how to switch on a computer". Those are quite linked.

Another factor—it is the major factor for some—is concern about fraud and security. I remember speaking to a man who is 70, so not that old, who had been subject to a banking fraud and had lost money. He said, "I know it's going to be a problem, but I'm never going to use a computer, I'm never going to go online again." The situation was too difficult for him. That is another factor that is quite important.

There is the cost of both equipment and data, and also whether it is value for money. If you think you are only going to use the internet for an occasional email, again, you may not think it is worth while. We know there are a lot of pressures on costs at the moment; cost is a factor, but it is not necessarily the first thing that springs to mind for older people.

The final issue is, I would say, around health and sensory impairments, and cognitive decline. Unfortunately, as we get older, most of us will have an element of cognitive decline—not necessarily dementia—but it may make it harder to learn new skills and retain information.

So there are a range of factors. A lot of those barriers can be overcome but, for some people, it is probably too much and, even with all the support, they may never feel confident and want to actually get online.

Dr Robin Christopherson: I totally agree with everything that was just said. To come at this from the angle of disability, which has a strong correlation to older age groups as well—there is higher prevalence of disability in older age—digital confidence is a challenge. We can talk later about possible solutions and about wariness of the whole online space and all the scare stories from the media, or even from friends and family.

Devices are getting simpler to use inasmuch as we are moving away from the necessity to use a PC, where you probably would have to read a manual to be able to operate it—despite the best efforts of the software manufacturers, who threw every function possible into something like Microsoft Word or Office—to tablets, which are an excellent first device, or only device, to help people get online.

There are brilliant initiatives that we, and many other voluntary sector organisations such as DevicesDotNow, have been involved in, where people get a tablet. As they are not online, they might need a MiFi as well—one of these portable wi-fi hotspots with a cellular connection—so they can get online using their tablet or their smart speaker and become familiar with the functionality of the smart speaker.

Like many other third sector organisations, we have a volunteer network that can help to support particular stakeholders and get them set up with those devices, get them familiar with the core uses that they might want

it for: staying connected with friends and family, maybe doing a bit of online shopping, potentially online banking—that sort of thing. If we can overcome that level of inertia, then something like a tablet, which is very affordable these days, can really help.

We should not underestimate the power of the settings within these devices. There is a plethora of settings in a standard Android or iOS tablet—an iPad—and in an iPhone or Android smartphone. At Ability Net, we have really good resources such as mycomputermyway.com, which lists step by step how you can get the best out of all your devices, whether it is desktop, tablet, smartphone, or whatever it might be. That is something that is commonly underestimated or underexplored. If, for example, you did a spider diagram of all the settings within the settings app of your iPhone and drilled down into each of the different areas, the accessibility area would account for over 60% of the volume of all the settings you can adjust on your phone, so you really ignore it at your peril. A lot of what we are doing is to make people aware of how powerful the devices are that they already have.

Affordability is improving. We could talk about some of the lack of affordability or transparency in pricing of ISPs—even the dark patterns that they employ to penalise loyal customers to get them on to more expensive packages—and that sort of thing, but the cost of devices is coming down. Given the right support, that can be really helpful.

We should not underestimate smart speakers. A lot of businesses are looking to provide information, if not hard services, through smart speakers. There is a lot of potential there as well.

Lastly, there is the accessibility of the app or the website that those groups need to access to get those groceries to their door, because they cannot actually get out to the store themselves—that was particularly so during Covid. The other half of the scale of the entire problem is making sure that the apps and websites are compliant and inclusive. It is one thing to have the right training, support and device, but what if you then go to a particular app or website and you are stuck? We can talk about that later as well.

Dr Jake Anders: In the context of younger people, the overarching factor is likely to be around subject of disadvantage. Those who are from less advantaged backgrounds are much less likely to have the same access to technology and digital connectivity as those from more affluent backgrounds.

A slight distinction to draw is that just solving that in and of itself does not solve the problem. Research has found that socioeconomic background is a very strong predictor of whether people are using online learning, for example. Among those who do, the frequency of use and quality of online learning activities is then more associated with the support and integration of that digital learning into schools' curricula. There is a connection between home and schools in terms of how it is being used.

There are these multiple dimensions which have to interact in order to get people to be making the best use of digital resources for education, in particular. That is where I am likely to focus in particular when thinking about people's benefits from digital inclusion.

The Lord Bishop of Leeds: Thank you. Finally, Patricia Bailey.

Patricia Bailey: Nowadays, especially during Covid-19, we have had to do meetings by Zoom, and the connectivity is not always there. To be honest, having a smartphone is really expensive. It is good to have it in a way, because you can connect with any app on the phone, but not everyone can afford a smartphone just to go on Zoom. Also, people living in poverty are finding it really hard. As Sally said, the pensioners are the ones who really suffer, because they do not know anything about this new technology. They can be taught, but it takes a lot of time and a lot of patience to get them to understand: "You need to press this button to do this", or "You need to go on this website". It takes a lot.

I am a certain age now and, at first, when I was connecting to Zoom, I nearly chucked my phone out the window because it would not connect. Now, I can just click on the Zoom icon and it is perfect but, before, there was that first bit of the meeting—or quite a bit of the meeting—that I missed because of not being able to connect. It is just—

The Chair: It is coming to terms with the unknown, is it not?

Patricia Bailey: Exactly. Just to get the hang of it has taken a long time.

The Lord Bishop of Leeds: Then it becomes a matter of habit, does it not? When you do it again and again, it becomes easier.

Patricia Bailey: Yes.

Q26 **The Lord Bishop of Leeds:** You do not all have to respond to this, but much of what we have heard, particularly at the beginning, applied to older people. I wonder whether it is applicable across the board. Mythologies grow up that old people do not know, or that they are too fearful, which is nonsense when you meet a lot of old people who are very adept. We talked about pensioners just now, but clearly a lot of pensioners are very adept at using new technology. What are the mythologies that grow up, and how can we separate the mythologies from the reality?

Sally West: You are right in saying that age is a factor, but that does not mean that, because you are over a certain age, you cannot use technology. I will probably focus today on those who are digitally excluded or having difficulties. Of course, this does not mean that most older people are not using technology—whether they are 70, 80, 90, or whatever—but it is right to look at the different factors and not to say that one group is able and another is not.

We know there are certain factors associated with digital exclusion. If you are disabled, at any age, you are more likely to be digitally excluded and face other issues to do with socioeconomic disadvantage. All those

factors work together and, across the older population, we know that there are as many differences as there are similarities.

The Lord Bishop of Leeds: It is a complex of interrelated factors rather than a single category.

Dr Jake Anders: Inevitably, we talk about disproportionality, as it were, with this group more likely to be affected. The UK Digital Poverty Evidence Review 2022 found that 10% of those who are offline are under the age of 50, so thinking about it just as a problem of age is clearly not right when there is that group of those who are under the age of 50. There will always be exceptions to the patterns that are set out; they can be anywhere. The review suggests tackling this as its own problem and trying to identify people who are digitally excluded, rather than targeting groups who we presume are going to be digitally excluded.

Q27 **Lord Lipsey:** We have fantastically interesting myths that keep popping up out of the data and which we need to put right, as you were doing for older people. To give an example that came before this committee, there was a family that consisted of two parents and three children doing schoolwork online because their school was closed. They do not count as digitally excluded because they have a device—a mobile phone.

In the same way, to take the problems of older people, which of them relate to them not learning the skills earlier in life? It is like voting behaviour. For a long time, the Conservatives did particularly well because there was no Labour Party around for people to vote for. It is the same with older people. I came five years too late for digital technology.

There are others in completely different situations, which will need different cures, to put it that way. For example, if one half of a couple dies and they were the one who always did the stuff on the internet, the other is left bereft. There is a lot of subtlety to be gained by making more than just global assumptions like all old people cannot use tech, particularly when you are looking towards solutions, but also in analysing the data. My question is: does that resound with you?

Sally West: Yes, I am sure that is right. Another point—I do not know if it is a myth—is that we talk about digital inclusion and digital exclusion, but it is a scale, of course. I am sure that this will come up during the session, but using the internet occasionally does not mean that you can do everything, or want to do everything, online.

Dr Jake Anders: I was going to make exactly the same point in respect of the example you gave. Was that family digitally included or excluded? Well, in some ways, because they had a point of connectivity, they were probably included, but they were having to share a device. In the context of young people trying to join remote learning on a device—in particular, a mobile device rather than a more fixed thing in multiple spaces—being able to join in two separate rooms with quiet spaces is what is actually important for them to be digitally included in remote learning in a meaningful way.

Dr Robin Christopherson: This, again, is not so much a myth as an assumption. There is a general assumed low expectation for people with disabilities to be able to function fully in society. That might now be reducing—one would hope that there are some good examples in the media and elsewhere of really empowered disabled people—but there is also this spiral, or a Catch-22, where low expectations lead to those people not getting the right choices or the right opportunities in life, particularly in employment.

I am sure that you have all heard of the appalling situations where disabled people have applied for jobs—many hundreds in some cases. They have ticked the box or filled out the part of the application that allows them to disclose a disability so that reasonable adjustments can be put in place; then that very area, that element of the application process, is used to filter them out. There is lots of research in the third sector to quantify that this is real discrimination by the use of that very element that is supposed to help employers to do better and to adjust for those candidates. It is a real issue.

Technology is a great enabler and a great leveller. Therefore, we need an awareness of, or to try in some way to change, that mindset. If it is adapted and properly supported, and if what people are accessing is inclusive, technology can really help them to perform at their best. There is a lot of research done by the Health and Safety Executive, for example, which shows that more diverse workforces are happier generally across the board—not just the disabled or diverse staff members—and they all take less sick leave and stay longer in their jobs. There are so many other areas around reduced compromise agreements and so on.

We all know that a more diverse workforce is a really powerful thing, but we have the cart before the horse: there is not a general appreciation that people with disabilities are not going to be problematic in the workplace. That is despite all our legislation, which has the greatest of intentions and, in some cases—such as PSBAR, the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations—has teeth as well. We have seen movement in the public sector, which we can talk about a little later. There are levers that we can pull to try to address some of these inequalities.

The Chair: Thank you. I should have said at the beginning that it will not always be necessary for all of you to answer every question—indeed, time will not allow it—but, before I move on to the next question, I just give Ms Bailey an opportunity. Are there any more myths or false truths about the digitally excluded that you want to mention?

Patricia Bailey: I just make the point that there are people struggling to even feed and heat themselves; therefore, broadband expenses and buying technology devices tend to be put aside. This results in digital access feeling like it is a privilege for those living in poverty, but in the world that we are living in, access to the internet is essential. As I said before, if you want to have a meeting or whatever, you need to have the

technology to do it and to be able to go on Zoom, Teams or whatever internet service you are using.

The Chair: That gives us a good lifting off point to the next question. We move on now to the benefits that come from being included. Lord Hall has a question.

Q28 **Lord Hall of Birkenhead:** It would be really interesting to hear from you— and as specifically as you can, because I am sure you have some very clear ideas—about the benefits of greater digital inclusion. What might those benefits be? What might they bring? For example, we have seen in our briefings that YouGov suggests that households might lose £286 a month by being digitally excluded—that is a very real issue in that research. Patricia, can we start with your thoughts on this?

Patricia Bailey: I will quote one of the APLE members, if that is okay? They say: "For someone who lives in poverty, the digital divide is not having enough money when you need to switch from your old mobile phone to a new smartphone, because nowadays sending texts and making phone calls is no longer enough. It is to see your data package that used to last you a month disappear in a matter of days because meetings are now taking place on Zoom. It is when your GP assumes it is easier for you to book an appointment online rather than to call reception.

It is not being able to do your homework because your older sibling is doing theirs on the unique family tablet. It is feeling lost on the online system when you try to find your blood results because you are not tech savvy. It is being unable to read and answer your personal emails after 5 pm or on the weekend, because your local library is closed. It is not knowing how to juggle between different tabs on your smartphone when you need to use dual identification to access your bank account.

The digital divide is when systems that are supposedly created to make life so much simpler for the many are overlooking all the hurdles and complications that they will create for people who are facing one or more of these three barriers: affordability, access, and skills. If you do not exist online, it is like you do not exist at all. You are excluded. Therefore, digital inclusion would benefit every aspect of someone living in poverty: education, health, finances, social integration, et cetera".

Lord Hall of Birkenhead: Thank you. That is very powerful. What comes across is that, at every level of your interactions with society, digital exclusion has a real impact; and that this is typical of the sort of evidence that you gain doing what you do. Thank you very much, indeed. Jake, from the point of view of your work, what would be the benefits of greater digital inclusion?

Dr Jake Anders: We saw a particularly acute example of the importance of digital inclusion for education during the Covid-19 switch to remote learning. Obviously, we all hope we are not going to have similar experiences again in the future, but nevertheless, online learning and things like it are an increasingly important part of the education mix. The evidence from that remains useful and important.

Evidence we collected as part of the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities Study, which I lead, found those young people with a laptop or a tablet spent 14 hours a week on schoolwork during lockdown one. Young people who had access only to a mobile phone in order to do online lessons and things like that reported spending only 9.8 hours on remote learning during that time, and those without a device at all only eight hours. Clearly, those without a device were likely not joining any remote lessons at all, but that certainly spills over into other aspects of that learning. There were similar patterns but higher up for those in lockdown three as well.

As I say, that is in some ways an extreme example, but it is not just about being unable to join remote lessons. Given how much is communicated by the schools to parents and young people through apps, online portals and things like that these days, all those things contributed to those young people being less able to engage with their learning, especially during that period.

Lord Hall of Birkenhead: What about when they have finished their learning and are thinking about their future careers, what jobs they might go for, college versus university—is there evidence for that?

Dr Jake Anders: I do not have direct evidence or research studies on that, I am afraid, but so much of that information is online nowadays. UCAS, as a portal for accessing both FE and HE courses, is an online service, which makes it much harder for young people without access to get through. They have to find a way and I have no doubt that schools support them, but it means that they are less likely to be able to access all the information and have it to hand when they try to make decisions that will affect the rest of their life.

As has been mentioned, so many meetings, job interviews and so on are now online. If an employer expects you to be able to join a job interview online and you cannot, or you have to go and do it somewhere with public wi-fi rather than at home in a quiet room, it will put you at a disadvantage compared with those who are able to do those things.

Lord Hall of Birkenhead: Sally, from the opposite end of the scale, what benefits or services are those who are, in data terms, less likely to use the internet missing?

Sally West: There is a range. Patricia talked about some of the issues for people who are not online, and we certainly hear about a range of difficulties in accessing services or paying more for some things. I started by talking about the lack of motivation. Sometimes people will say, "You just don't really understand what the benefits will be". Age UK provides support with helping people gain digital skills, particularly through our local Age UK organisations. They often say that one of the first things you have to do is try to encourage and interest people to get online. You cannot just put up a notice and say, "Come and learn digital skills", or even, "We have some tablets to give out, come along". You have to try to reach people first, talk to them and explain potential benefits. Some of the things people might start off with are social contacts, keeping in contact with friends and families, emails—

Lord Hall of Birkenhead: Dealing with loneliness, I guess, which is a big thing.

Sally West: Yes, staying connected. Of course, the pandemic was a clear time for this. As mobility decreases and people are unable to get out, you need to find the hook to interest them: perhaps they want to research the history of their football team, look at what happened to the bands they used to listen to in their 20s or research a family tree.

Once you get people interested and they realise there is a whole world out there on the internet, then you start looking at practical information: making appointments with the doctor, or contacting local authorities—some of the things that are difficult. They then maybe move on to purchasing things, online tickets, and shopping. Online banking is often the last thing that people feel confident doing. Even if they are happy doing shopping and other things, people sometimes say, "Oh, but I wouldn't do online banking; that's too risky." It is about finding what will be useful and enjoyable in people's lives and then giving them the support to be able to engage in that.

Although there are lots of benefits to being online, part of the problem for people who are digitally excluded is that it can be increasingly difficult to access public, health and local authority services. Although we want to do all we can to encourage those who can gain the skills to be able to access services and essential support directly, we are very keen that people who are offline can still access important services and support. That needs to be the other side of the coin: not everybody is online, or yet online, and they should not be excluded from vital services.

Lord Hall of Birkenhead: You are saying that it is not just about services but about community and a sense of enjoying the richness of life online—in that sense, digitally included. Thank you very much.

Robin, is there anything you would like to add to this idea of the benefits of being online—being included rather than excluded?

Dr Robin Christopherson: The rest of the panel have done a brilliant job of highlighting the crucial areas. You cannot really add much to what Patricia's APLE member said. To reiterate, digital is hugely important now; often it is the only channel, so choice is really, really important. We have been doing a lot of work with the NHS on digitising its services et cetera, because there needs to be a fallback: there need to be other channels, albeit side channels. We all know about how long you have to sit on calls sometimes. It is definitely often the poor cousin to digital these days.

My main point when it comes to disability is that those other channels are often not an option. Digital is uniquely flexible. As a blind person, everything talks to me. I could use a refreshable braille display; if I could not use my hands then I could use voice recognition. You can make text bigger, change it to the colours you like—I could go on and on. That is our bread and butter at AbilityNet; it keeps us very busy, telling people about how they can adjust to overcome any impairment, even if you can just use your eyes.

Technology is uniquely versatile in that way, so digital has lots of promise, but we are obviously discussing some of the challenges in bringing it to everybody. For people with disabilities, if digital is not available to them, or if it is but the services they are accessing are not compliant, there is a challenge there. As a blind person, I am really looking forward to when the whole of the NHS is digitised, because I do not do paper. Access to Work finally went digital during the pandemic, so I had the option of going to email correspondence and filling out online forms as a disabled employee when dealing with Access to Work. That is still not the default channel; it is still very paper heavy. We are getting there, but there needs to be that fallback for when digital is not going to work for some of these harder-to-reach groups we have been talking about.

Q29 **Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie:** My supplementary question follows on really nicely from what you just said. We are looking at this problem of identifying which populations are currently digitally excluded and why. A lot of the conversation is based on the premise that if we can solve that in some way then the world will be a better place. At the risk of sounding like the Luddite in the room, are there some things that should not be just digital, and where digital is not necessarily the nirvana that we are searching for? In your particular populations, are there things that you have identified or research you have seen or know about where things are being lost because everything is moving online? That might be NHS appointments, well-being in schools or social factors; I am not sure.

Dr Robin Christopherson: There are lots of different areas that are heavily digitally focused, and it is really challenging. I mentioned how long you have to sit on phone calls to get through to a human being. That is a very real problem.

Touching on academia for a second, after the pandemic everything is increasingly online: you might physically go to lectures again these days, but they are delivering material remotely or virtually, and you can go away and access that content on the learning management system of that university or college later on. Accessibility is a massive afterthought in those situations; the lecturers are not aware, or do not have the brain space, training or bandwidth to factor it in. When you asked the question, education popped into my head most because it is so digitally focused these days. We really are leaving people behind who cannot access that content, in terms of training support, devices and even accessing the materials themselves.

As a side note, as digital is so important now, why are we still looking at university degree courses on digital, which have a very heavy digital component, where how to do that in an inclusive way is one lecture, or module if you are really lucky? It is a massive afterthought, whereas there are things to consider for every piece of software you use, whether it is a Word document, a PowerPoint presentation or building a software package. That really needs to become part of how we work, just like running a spell-check to create a professional document before you hit send or save.

The good news is there are brilliant tools. The accessibility checker in Office is absolutely fantastic but nobody uses it. If there is one takeaway for me, it would be that the Government somehow make everybody aware of the accessibility checker that is already in Office. The vast majority of content that ends up on education platforms, or being sent to the patient, used in businesses or sent to customers, starts off in Office. Something as simple as that would make a massive difference, so there are some really practical things we can do.

Q30 **Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie:** Dr Anders, my question is not about what we can do to make digital more accessible; it is whether we can identify things that are going digital that maybe should not and where we are losing something.

Dr Jake Anders: I do not know that we have gone too far with that happening too much in education; a lot would absolutely be lost if that happened. Pastoral care is clearly very important: the dynamic and relationship-building between teacher and pupil, and the wider family, is infinitely harder in a digital context. I am not aware of it being digitised in various ways, but maybe it is. I would be nervous about that, given the challenges there. You would need to ensure that it happens in a way that preserves those relationships, which are so important for it achieving its aims.

Sally West: For us, it is access to public and other essential services. I heard a rather nice phrase, "Digital first, but not digital only", which is how services should approach it. Health services clearly face issues for getting appointments, repeat prescriptions and other sorts of access. We have done quite a bit of work on local authority services in particular. Our colleagues at Age UK London recently did a study asking about how people access services, such as claiming housing benefit, if they are not online. They found that about a third of London local authorities said that you had to do it online.

Through our local Age UK organisations across England and Wales, we recently asked about applying for a blue badge—parking for disabled people. Again, some areas say that you have to do it online, or they make it very difficult; one adviser said that you have to argue with staff to get a paper form. There may be ways of accessing it or people may be told to get help to find some way of doing it online.

Our concern is that it is making people less independent or they do not access services at all, because they are told they have to do it online and they cannot. There need to be easy-to-use digital services, which will mean that more and more people can use them, but you do need to bear in mind that there will be a minority of people who will not be able to. Similarly, we know that banking branches are closing down, partly because more people are banking online, but we know not everybody is. There are some banking hubs, bringing together different branches in one area. We certainly think that there needs to be continued access for the minority who need it.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: Patricia, I feel your point from your

APLE contributor said it all.

Patricia Bailey: Yes. I want to talk about two things. The first is universal credit. As you know, it is all done online, everything from filling in the forms to writing to a work coach. If people who need to apply for universal credit do not have a computer at home, which a lot of people do not, they have to go to a jobcentre. I did two weeks of work experience at my local jobcentre when universal credit first came out in the SE1 area. I was the one that had to help people apply for universal credit. They had to have an email address and a password; if they did not, then they could not claim. That was not fair on them. English was not the first language of some of the people I helped, so trying to explain to them what the form entails was a nightmare—it is a really long form and there are so many questions. If, at the end, they agree, then they have to wait for an appointment, which the get via email. That person then has to go into the jobcentre with all their IDs and everything just to claim universal credit.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: There are privacy issues as well.

Patricia Bailey: Yes. With social services as well, a lot of it, especially court proceedings, was done online. No one was allowed to go into the courtroom itself. I do not think this gave families enough say in how things were decided, because they were in their front room, or wherever they could get support, with their support worker sitting beside them. It is just not nice to feel like you are being judged without being there in person. I am glad, in a way, that everything is getting back to normal, so people can actually physically go in front of the judge and hear what the guardian ad litem, the social workers and their managers are saying about the family and the decisions that need to be made.

Going back to universal credit, to be honest with you, that is one benefit that should not have been brought in, because it causes too many hurdles where, if you do not reach a certain criteria or you cannot provide an email address, you cannot claim.

The Chair: That is very clear, thank you.

Q31 **Lord Lipsey:** You are going into fascinating territory, but I wonder if there are not some things that we miss when we describe digital exclusion in the way we do. I am pretty bad at it; I am better than some people I know, but worse than most of them.

My experience of being a customer online has deteriorated. I am half-excluded as a result of this development. If you cannot go online to do something, when you ring they spend the first 10 minutes trying to persuade you not to do it by talking to somebody but to continue doing it online, even though their system invariably has flaws that make it impossible. They have sacked all the operators on the call lines because they are trying to get you to go online, so the longer they keep you waiting, the happier they are.

There seems to be a bigger injustice here than the very important injustice to people who are actually physically excluded from the use of

digital. We are all suffering from the downside of digital and from firms' extreme reluctance to do anything about the things that make it unusable. Why should I update my parliamentary software every couple of weeks, which then renders it unusable for quite a long time because you have to try and get used to this new stuff? I am saying that digital exclusion is an extreme aspect of exclusion of everybody from the services they desperately need. Does that ring any bells with you, Sally? Sorry, I went on a bit.

Sally West: Yes, things like updates and keeping up with technology certainly come up. It is one of the problems, because you may be an absolute whizz when you leave work and you will know all the latest technology, but then things change during your retirement: you get a new update and you think, "Goodness, what am I going to do with this?" Yes, it is about needing to be able to continue to update skills, and for companies making their businesses very easy to access online when people want to. Sometimes the websites that sell you things are easier to use than the ones for when you are trying to sort out a problem. We would certainly agree there should be good telephone customer service for people who do not want to use those or cannot.

The Chair: Dr Christopherson, did you want to say something briefly? We are then going to move on.

Dr Robin Christopherson: Very briefly, yes. Always get people with more extreme needs or requirements involved in development. We have had people try to fill out a paper form which says, "Time at current address", and they happen to be at home so they look up at the clock and write 4.24 pm, or something. Very simple things like that can be a barrier; it is not just about the fact it is digital.

When it comes to digital, it is not good enough for products to be developed by young, able-bodied males who have no concept of how challenging what they are creating is. That "Nothing about us without us" strapline is really valuable. Every organisation has special interest groups and ERGs; leverage the power of your disabled users, customers and employees with lived experiences and you will have better products for everybody.

The Chair: Hear, hear, on behalf of all short people around the world. The people who designed the chairs for these meeting rooms are usually six foot men; they are certainly not five foot one inch women, that is for sure.

Q32 **Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill:** Some people argue that the internet should be regarded as a human right and that it is basically a utility that everybody should have access to. What solutions and initiatives designed to tackle digital exclusion are likely to be the most effective, in your experience? Does this vary for different demographics?

Sally West: Yes. I can tell you a bit about our approach at Age UK. There are many organisations that provide digital inclusion support. We tend to use a digital champions model, which is training staff and volunteers to work directly with people, usually on a one-to-one basis,

and, as I said earlier, trying to think about what will be of most interest or use to that individual. It is ongoing, one-to-one, very tailored support to learn to do the things that people want to do, but also making sure that security and being confident online are part of that.

The first thing is raising awareness, giving people a digital taster session and then ongoing support, with the opportunity to come back. People go home and think, "I can't even switch on the tablet; I do not know what to do", so they are often sent home with written instructions so they have a step-by-step guide and somebody to contact when they are not sure. We find that approach tends to work best with older people: a tailored approach where you take things at somebody's own pace—not a formal regulated process or qualification, but just gearing it up to people's needs.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: Dr Christopherson, what would be the best way forward to ensure that people have access to both the data and the devices? Have you come across best practice that you could inform the committee of?

Dr Robin Christopherson: We saw the mass handing out of devices during the pandemic, which was brilliant, but then very soon people realised that just giving people devices was not enough. That was then combined with volunteers going out into homes, helping to set up those devices, and then giving ongoing support. As we just heard, awareness of what initiatives are out there and the level of support really need to be human driven. I know that has a challenge from a scalability point of view. AbilityNet and the RNIB co-deliver a national volunteer network aimed at these very stakeholders—older people, people with disabilities, et cetera—so we can absolutely play a part in that.

On a very specific point, I want to revisit the accountability of ISPs in the way that they sell their broadband services. I very much see this, if not as a legislation, then as an Ofcom issue, because a lot of them—I am thinking of one in particular—very much hide their pricing. They do not reward loyalty; the best offer is for new customers.

As a blind person, I was with one ISP for two decades—I can say who they are if you like. My broadband was eye-watering, because I had the TV package bundled in. Every time that I called them to say, "Can I unbundle this TV package? I am blind; we don't watch TV", I was told that actually, if we unbundled it, it would go up, because having the packages attracts a discount. It was around £80 a month. I threatened to cancel; they put me through to another department that could offer me £6 less. I actually cancelled the package all together and had several weeks left to run of the contract. They called me back two days later and offered £26 a month. I cannot believe how much I overspent with that company in the 10 to 15 years that I was with it as a loyal customer.

The Chair: Can you please tell us who that was?

Dr Robin Christopherson: Virgin Media, but there are others out there—TalkTalk, Plusnet, companies like that. BT came down our street and took away the telephone cables to the houses. Virgin came along,

put in all the fibre and gave everyone their landlines through that. This has issues when it comes to emergency calling as well, if the power is down. Things like that are really important and need to be explored. I know that it can be a challenge to get good broadband in rural areas et cetera, but even in well-connected places, vulnerable groups of people are really having sharp practice applied to them.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: Thank you very much. I am sure we all sympathise with your phone contracts.

Dr Robin Christopherson: I could afford it, but there are so many people out there where that could have been their disposable income for the month.

The Chair: I think Lord Foster is going to continue on this theme.

Q33 **Lord Foster of Bath:** Dr Christopherson, you raised the issue of the cost of broadband packaging. Of course we know that other issues need to be addressed—the affordability of the kit to connect to the internet, the skills that you need to have before you can use it and so on—but I want to explore with all of you whether we could do more in the area of social tariffs, and whether that could be a bigger part of the solution to the problem.

I think there are currently 23 different packages at different prices from 20 different companies, claiming to save up to £250 a year, according to Which?, but we also know about your point, Dr Christopherson, on the accessibility button checker on Office and that not enough people seem to know about it—or, if they do, they are not using it, because we have only about 3% of the eligible population who actually use social tariffs. I want to know whether you think we should be looking at ways to boost their use. If so, how, and how a high priority should that be, or are there other issues we ought to be addressing more importantly?

Dr Jake Anders: It is not a big area of expertise for me because my focus is particularly on young people and the family unit. I do not know the extent to which these things have already been tried, but you can imagine that social tariffs do not always form the big banner that the companies advertise when you go to their website to sign up with them. I do not think that is true universally; I recall seeing them on some websites. Where people are foregrounding those is an example of good practice, but perhaps it could be embedded in the sign-up process: "Do any of these things apply to you? If so, maybe you should consider this alternative package, which would meet your needs for a significantly lower cost, if you meet these eligibility criteria."

Patricia Bailey: In APLE, we believe that, for any changes to be effective, people with lived experience need to be involved in their development. You could have economists, politicians, policymakers, professionals et cetera, but without someone with the lived experience of digital exclusion you are not going to form effective solutions. We are the experts, not the professionals. Therefore, we believe that working together on potential solutions is the only way that will result in an effective outcome.

Q34 **Lord Foster of Bath:** That is very helpful, and I do not disagree. Turning to you and persons with lived experience, would social tariffs for cheaper prices on the internet be an important part of the solution to help get over the barriers that digital exclusion brings? Is it a big issue or are there more important issues, such as reducing the cost of equipment, doing more skills training or not making everything digital in the first place?

Patricia Bailey: I find that if you say to companies such as Sky, Virgin, et cetera, "Oh, this is too high", they will do their utmost to try to keep you on a certain contract, especially if you do not have the money and you are trying to bring it down to an affordable level. For instance, I am with Sky, which said, "We can give you this much". I said that I could not afford it, so it brought it down. It is now at an affordable level but I do not have the TV package with it; I only have the broadband.

Dr Robin Christopherson: There is a lot of sharp practice out there. The more the Government can do to encourage transparency the better. I like the idea of social tariffs but I am not sure how they could be managed or monitored. It would not be a case of means testing but there would have to be some mechanism. I am in favour of them because the fact that you have a lot of flexibility in bringing the price down implies there is a lot of profit built into the standard packages that companies are very reluctant to disclose or relinquish.

When it comes to online, we know that it is hard to find the good deals. As we have heard, they are not the banner ads. Dark patterns, which is excluding the things they have to put there that they do not want you to see and making it hard to find them, are very common. You can then layer on a lack of confidence when it comes to digital and a lack of accessibility, because they have not factored that in as well. My daily life on the internet is incredibly hard and frustrating, and I am a power user, but because of inaccessibility it is still a daily struggle. I am sure I miss out on a lot of potential bargains, et cetera, because they are not immediately made accessible to me. It is challenging.

The Chair: We move on to the final category of questions.

Q35 **Lord Kamall:** It has been fascinating hearing from you. In some ways, you have partly answered this question, but I am going to ask you to think about it in the following way. When people ask for solutions, they always start with just government and what government can do. At other times, they forget some of the great initiatives out there which you have talked about here.

I wonder whether we could start with almost a thought experiment. What do you think companies and charities should, and could, be doing more of? When we come to government, I want you to look at it in two ways. One is what government can do with its power either to bash heads or to convene; Dr Christopherson gave a great example about transparency of tariffs.

Finally, if government can spend some money—there is always pressure in government from different departments and everyone is always

competing with each other—where would that be most cost-effectively spent?

Could you start with what you want to see more of from business and from charity, or civil society, and then move right on to government? I will start with Dr Christopherson, because you brought us into that point and you have given some very good examples.

Dr Robin Christopherson: I think businesses are doing quite a lot. At AbilityNet, our main areas are digital but also technology in the hands of disabled people, so we have two arms to our organisation. For the last two decades when we have been delivering digital we have seen a steady increase in appreciation of the fact that there is significant ROI—return on investment—when it comes to making sure that digital is inclusive. That is concomitant with the rise of digital, because why exclude certain groups?

So despite what I was saying a moment ago about it being challenging; we have seen a massive rise in organisations coming to us. There is a general appreciation of the compelling business case of accessibility. There is one. It helps disabled people, it helps everybody else, and it makes your products and services easier to use by all. Extreme users make for extremely usable products for everybody else—so more of the same for business. If we can come away from today thinking how we can make businesses more aware of the compelling business case, that would certainly help businesses to do their bit.

The third sector needs to do more of the same, but it is a tough climate for it. As a charity, we stopped trying to seek core funding from government a long time ago. We have got no core funding from government for the last 15 years, and initiatives, which are mostly EU-based, are cut to the bone when it comes to profitability. We have had to grow our commercial services, helping organisations to become more inclusive, just to survive and deliver our free services.

It is a tough climate for charities out there, but they need to be able to carry on doing more of what they do, if they can—I do not have any quick answers to how they could be enabled or empowered to do that—because charities play a massively important role, as we have been hearing today.

Coming to government, government does not actually have to do a massive amount on the ground to make a big difference. We saw that with PSBAR for the first time. We had the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995 and the Equality Act in 2010, but neither of those had teeth because the Government did not proactively enforce them at all; they relied on civil claims or group class actions et cetera.

With PSBAR, the EHRC and the Cabinet Office are actively monitoring and dishing out fines. That is not a publicly available activity; we cannot transparently see that. But anyone could put in an FOI request, because it is a public activity. It would be interesting to know what level of activity is actually going on. I suspect that it is a tiny fraction of the inaccessibility in the public sector bodies out there, but it still had this

massive paradigm. I cannot overemphasise how big a shift it has made in the public sector, because they all now know that it is being enforced proactively, so the optics there have been enough.

I would love to see that applied to the other sectors as in other countries. Norway, for example, has Difi, which is the equivalent and is monitoring and enforcing across all sectors. SAS, for example, its national airline, dragged its feet for a year before Difi stepped in and said, "We're now going to start fining you €15,000 a day. We'll give you 10 days before we start imposing those fines, but sort yourself out", because SAS's website was very inaccessible. It did it in 10 days before the fines started to hit. Often the threat of the enforcement is enough. This may or may not have an appetite within government, but it is an incredibly powerful thing. We have seen it with PSBAR. I would love to know how much activity on the ground the EHRC and the Cabinet Office had to do, and are doing, but I suspect it is tiny compared to the level of almost panic in Norway when it was realised that they finally meang business. I would love to see that.

Lord Kamall: That is very powerful, because a couple things that people say about government, apart from money, is that it is convenient but that it is also about bashing heads or bringing people to the table.

Can I ask you the same question, Sally? Clearly you are also in the third sector, or part of civil society. What more can you and your colleagues in civil society do? Could you give examples of government non-spending-money solutions, and, if you are going to spend money, where you target it?

Sally West: There is a lot of good practice in the voluntary sector, including my organisation and other organisations. Like Robin, we would like to do more of the same. It is challenging, because organisations do need funding to be able to do that. We get support from business, from charitable funds, from charitable trusts, but we would like to do much more of what we are doing.

Maybe we in the voluntary sector need to make sure that, locally and nationally, we join up, because there are a lot of different organisations. We recently had somebody from AbilityNet talking at one of our digital inclusion meetings to make sure that Age UK knows when we can refer and draw on all its expertise, and we also work with the Good Things Foundation.

I think the Government could be doing more of an overview in a co-ordinating role. In your session last week you talked about the Government's digital inclusion strategy in 2014. It would be very helpful for the Government to renew that and set out where we are today, with all the facts and figures and the different groups, where we want to get to and what we need to do to achieve it, and where the gaps are. Part of that is about making sure that there are still services for those who do not use the internet and that public sector duties are followed where that applies to public sector bodies. There is a good overview role for government.

Lord Kamall: It was very interesting that you talked about digital first, not digital only. It is almost like state first, but not state only; or the other way around—private sector first, but not private sector only.

Dr Jake Anders: You are picking up the exact point: these cannot be completely separated. Government has a role in shaping the market environment in a way, and private sector firms should not need much of a push to do this well, as Dr Christopherson pointed out. In a bunch of ways, good design is good design for everybody, and highly accessible design is the right thing for online services to be provided with, regardless of who is trying to access them. It is also likely to streamline things and make things more efficient for those companies; we have heard about the perhaps negative sides of that if they use that to cut back on their human-interfacing services. However, other things being equal, when you can do more online, it should be empowering. It can help to make things become more accessible, rather than being seen only as a way of making things less accessible.

The Government have a leading-by-example role, and I think they have done quite well in lots of ways. GOV.UK has some faults, but it is very accessible by design in its provision of digital services and its direct interface. You need an email address to do those things, which is an additional point. Nevertheless, it is helpful.

Applying this to my particular setting and environment, a lot more could and should be done in the education space. Again, Dr Christopherson pointed out that not all online learning that is provided, whether in the primary, secondary or tertiary education sectors, is as good and accessible as it should be. I hope my own institution is reasonably good on such things; we are given a lot of prodding to make sure we do them and are told that we cannot upload certain types of documents et cetera because of accessibility concerns. It does add to our workload, but it is important in order to make those courses as widely accessible as possible. I suspect we are not a complete outlier in that sense. I suspect there is also more we could do, and I expect there is more everyone can do to make those as accessible as possible.

Lord Kamall: I teach at a university, and the challenge, as we go back to in-person following Covid, is that some students do not want to turn up. So I have stopped offering the online version and they have to come in, unless they have a very good reason why they cannot come, because otherwise you can end up with two people in a classroom and people with switched-off screens.

Dr Jake Anders: I know the feeling, but certainly for some people those other options are more accessible. How we square that circle I do not know, and we are continuing to discover post pandemic where the equilibrium is.

Lord Kamall: Patricia, you have made some really moving interventions and you have talked a lot about what government can do. I am not sure that I dismiss all that; we know that government has to do something and spend money. But can I ask you to think about what more you would like to see business and some of the charities do, and then come

back to government—in that order, please?

Patricia Bailey: A lot of the charities' meetings, especially ones that I am involved with have had to be done by Zoom. The problem, as I have said, is that not everyone can access them unless they come to the organisation I belong to, because a lot of them do not have internet access at home. At least they can feel like they are getting involved in meetings. It would be nice if the Government and companies could come to a conclusion and say, "Look, we can do it at this price, or not". People are banging their head against a brick wall. They want to be more included in whatever is going on. If there is a meeting, they want to be involved with it, but they do not feel they can because they do not have the technology. As you know, owning a smartphone is really expensive, and they feel like they are being excluded from doing certain things by not having that phone.

Lord Kamall: There are some cheap smartphones on the market.

Patricia Bailey: There are, but not all the smartphones do what you need them to do.

Q36 **Baroness Wheatcroft:** It has been fascinating. Coming in at this stage, I would just like to do a little bit of sweeping up, if I may? Sally, you talked about a lot going on in the charitable sector but that there is probably a need for joining up. Who do you think should do the co-ordinating role?

Sally West: I do not know whether it is a specific or individual organisation. It is probably for all of us to be making sure that we know who else is working in the area and that we are working together, both on the local and the national level. I do not think there particularly needs to be somebody co-ordinating, but we just need to be aware; we do that a lot anyway.

Baroness Wheatcroft: If you are digitally excluded and you want easy access to help, how do you know where to go?

Sally West: Different organisations need to know what is available, so when you go to an organisation locally it should know who in that area might be able to help and what the most appropriate help is. If it is an older person and Age UK is running a scheme, that might be right. If it is somebody else, it might be a library service, for example. It is about organisation, so that wherever a person starts off, whether it is going to the library, Citizens Advice or whoever, people have a good knowledge of what is going on and who might be the best person to help.

Baroness Wheatcroft: Robin, could I ask you the same question? Do you think people at the moment know, first, that help is available and, secondly, where to go for it?

Dr Robin Christopherson: No, I do not. How you reach those people is probably a question for other organisations. I think "multichannel" is the answer to that. Old-school technologies should not be underestimated, like local radio and stuff like that. I do not know what capabilities they

have to give public service announcements in a very inclusive and attractive way.

Going back to empowering individuals who come up against inaccessibility, they have the device in their hand and know how to use it, but then they hit something that they absolutely have to use but it is inaccessible. There is one aspect of current legislation that really deters people from following this through, or, if they are not aware of it and do follow it through, it can really turn around and bite them. The current set-up is that if you are successful, your legal fees can be higher than your award. We saw this in a recent case where the legal fees were £23,000 and the award was £22,000, which meant that, after a lot of commitment to the legal process and being successful, she was out of pocket by £1,000.

Obviously, apart from getting fined, the organisation then had to remedy the situation—hopefully, that actually happened—but that is a very significant loophole or issue with the current situation that ideally would be addressed. It is often the only option you have when you have exhausted other channels trying to get something you absolutely have to use to be inclusive for you. We should not underestimate that. There is a lot of inaccessibility out there despite the general raising of awareness. It does not happen by default.

Baroness Wheatcroft: Absolutely. If you were writing the long-awaited digital inclusion strategy for the Government, what would your top three items be?

Dr Robin Christopherson: Give the law some teeth, as I mentioned before, because the whole time we have been in this area there has been a seismic shift that has made a huge difference, which you can see impacting people's daily lives in interfacing with key local digital government or public services. It is really important, and I want to see that elsewhere as well.

Helping individuals to become aware of stuff that their devices can already do is massively underestimated and underutilised. We need a public awareness campaign that allows people to be aware of the power of the devices they have and the sources of support that are out there across all the different organisations represented here today.

In summary, we need awareness raising about the support that is out there and the support that is in your devices, and giving them some legislation, some teeth.

Baroness Wheatcroft: That is a great start for them, thank you. Finally, I come to Jake. We are not about asking the Government to spend money they do not have, but could you tell us what proportion of school-aged children now have their own digital device provided by the school and whether you think a great start to getting rid of any divide would be making sure that every school-aged child had a device?

Dr Jake Anders: I am not going to give a number now—I could follow that up in writing to the committee, if that would be helpful—but it is definitely increasingly becoming a requirement to engage with their

education. I do not know the best way of doing that. Covid was a difficult time for the Government to be trying to do it. They did not have fantastic success in reaching everyone during that period. We know that 47% of those who reported that they needed a device at the beginning of the pandemic had received one by the end of the school closure periods, so there continued to be a lot of unmet need during that period. We are not likely to go back to Covid, but we are likely to continue to have engagement with digital devices being part of education. I do not think it is the top priority for where additional pounds of education spending should be right now necessarily. Perhaps it is more of an ambition over time.

Baroness Wheatcroft: It seems that quite a lot of teaching in schools already uses digital devices in the classroom, but there are not enough to go around.

Dr Jake Anders: That can be the case. They can also end up being outdated, which is difficult, because devices age. It becomes a big thing that schools have to keep spending money on, and becoming overdependent on that is a danger, particularly if it leads to them being locked into expensive proprietary contracts or something like that. That is one of the things that makes me nervous about being wholehearted in my echoing of it.

We need to make sure that the purpose of the digital learning that goes on is understood, and that it is understood how the family is expected to help and support the child to use it at home as well as at school, and improving the quality and what the child gets out of it. That is probably harder than the quick fix of spending money but, ultimately, it is what is going to get more educational value out of these devices and of digital use in education.

The Chair: Thank you all very much. This has been an incredibly helpful session, and I am very grateful to each of you for giving up your time and being so open and frank with us, and for the powerful testimony that we have taken. It has been a huge privilege to have all four of you in front of us.