

## Written evidence submitted by Citizens Online [ROP0031]

Citizens Online is a national digital inclusion charity established in 2000. We work directly with individuals to help them improve their digital skills and confidence and provide access to digital devices and connectivity. We also train volunteers and staff members in other organisations to become digital champions to support learners. Many of the learners we work with are older people. We also work with organisations such as local authorities, health services, housing providers and businesses to understand digital exclusion in their area, and to help develop services and strategies that support digitally inclusive society. Our work is evidence based.

### QUESTION: IN WHAT AREAS IS DIGITAL EXCLUSION OF OLDER PEOPLE A PARTICULAR CONCERN?

Older people are more likely to be digitally excluded – to be offline, to lack digital skills, and less likely to have access to digital devices. However, age alone is not a simple predictor of digital exclusion, majority of people aged 65 and over are internet users.<sup>1</sup> When combined with other factors such as living on low Income, living alone, or being disabled the risk of being digitally excluded is increased. Similarly older people living in rural areas or areas with poor transport links, and with poor internet connection are at risk of digital exclusion.

### QUESTION: WHAT STEPS ARE REQUIRED TO PREVENT OLDER PEOPLE FROM BEING DIGITALLY EXCLUDED?

#### SUPPORT FOR OLDER PEOPLE WITH DIGITAL SKILLS, CONFIDENCE AND ACCESS

Older people need support with digital access, skills and confidence in a way that suits their circumstances.

1. Digital inclusion support is best when designed to be **person centred**, support provided should be based on the needs, abilities and interests of learners. Using the internet to do admin, such as ordering prescriptions, shopping or paying council tax is not likely to be the first thing to motivate people with low digital confidence to want to learn to use digital services. Instead, the support should be tailored to what is important to each individual.
  - Examples of person centred digital inclusion support in a sheltered housing scheme include [a 96 year old music lover who learned how to use YouTube to](#)

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<sup>1</sup> ONS [Internet use in the UK: annual estimates by age, sex, disability and geographical location](#), 2020. 85% of UK population who are estimated to have never used the internet are aged 65 or over (2.8 million people); but (71.1%) of people 65 or older are internet users..

[find musical videos](#) and a [resident who was able to re-connect with his brother after many years, after finding him online](#).

## Who should provide support to older people

2. There is a need for a **variety of support**. The first source of help with digital tasks is typically informal, from family members or friends. However, not everyone has people around them who have the digital skills and confidence themselves. Also there are limitations to 'informal' support. An older learner told us that when they asked help from a family member, they were told "*even a 5 year old could do this*".
  - There is a need for support provided by trained volunteers and as well as frontline staff in different organisations.
  - Digital Champions need ongoing support to ensure they can support learners. These should include access to resources they can use to support people with specific access or support needs, such as living with dementia. [Our case study on a learner with dementia](#) also highlights how this has enabled his wife to get a brief break from being a carer.
3. There is a need for **ongoing support from a trusted source**. Digital exclusion is no longer an issue of being offline or online – many people have some digital skills and are able to use some digital services, but are still excluded from things that would benefit them.
  - We know from research that people are much more likely to remain active and confident online if there is ongoing support in their area<sup>2</sup> and that even a small number of digital skills building sessions can boost confidence and use of digital services.<sup>3</sup>
  - There is a need to have access to ongoing support. This should be available through trusted organisations and venues older people engage with otherwise too, including libraries, coffee mornings, and community organisations.
4. **Support at home**: Majority of digital inclusion support is available in community venues, including libraries. While these meet the needs of many older people, for people with mobility difficulties, with caring duties or who live in a rural area, accessing these can be a challenging.
  - There is a need for [digital support in learners' homes](#). While this is more costly and time consuming, the benefits to housebound learners are significant and there is a need for such support.

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<sup>2</sup> Harper, E., BT & Citizens Online: [Get IT Together. Longitudinal Study](#), 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Centre for Ageing Better & Citizens Online, [COVID-19 and the digital divide](#), 2021.

## Improving awareness of support available

5. **There is a lack of awareness** of support available to help older people with digital skills, access and connectivity:
  - 87% of 50-70 year olds living on in households with an income of under 25K, did not know where to go to get help with digital skills<sup>4</sup>
  - Lack of awareness of social tariffs for broadband. Half of low income households, who could be eligible for this support are unaware of it.<sup>5</sup> Any [support that saves money](#) is essential at time of rising cost of living.
  - Digital Inclusion Networks can bring local organisations together to raise awareness of what support is available locally. These networks also develop capacity and digital inclusion knowledge among local organisations and improve networking across organisations. Examples of successful networks include 100% Digital Leeds, Digital Brighton and Hove and Digital Support Derbyshire.
  - For organisations to be able to provide support there needs to be sustainable, long term funding for this work. It's important to recognise that as technology changes it bring new risks of exclusion. There is a long term need for digital inclusion support.

## WHAT ORGANISATIONS WHO PROVIDE DIGITAL SERVICES SHOULD DO

Since the pandemic more and more services have moved online, and many organisations take now a 'digital first' approach. Local councils and healthcare organisations provide essential services that residents have a right to access. There is a danger that moving these services online, with a limited or even no offline offer, means that access to these services will be limited or hindered for some residents. Similarly, access to other services can be limited without online access.

Public and private sector organisations who provide digital services need to provide support for people to access their services. This should include:

1. Providing assisted support to digitally excluded people.
2. Continued non-digital access services. There is no explicit regulation or law that requires councils to offer services offline or online. Recent research of local authorities' online / offline access to key services highlighted a significant gap in London for services that residents will not be able to access offline.<sup>6</sup> This was also one of the recommendations in research by Citizens Online and Centre for Ageing Better.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Centre for Ageing Better, [Digital Skills to Connect July 2021](#)

<sup>5</sup> Ofcom, [Half of low-income households in the dark over broadband social tariffs](#), 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Age UK London, [Access denied: accessing council services without the internet](#), 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Centre for Ageing Better & Citizens Online, [COVID-19 and the digital divide](#), 2021.

3. People with low digital skills should be involved in the design and/or testing of digital services.

Organisations that are providing important services, must include questions to find out about the digital skills of their clients or service users, provide them support and/or signpost them to other sources of support.

4. It's important to ask people accessing services a) if they have a device they use to connect to the internet, and b) are they confident to download a new app or navigate a new website. Even if people are accessing the service online, they may be using a device that does not belong to them, or someone might be supporting them to do things online.
5. If the answer to either question is no, this is an opportunity to signpost to support.
6. Organisations that would like to encourage more digital transactions would benefit from training staff to provide digital inclusion support. 1 in 5 adults in UK do not have all digital skills<sup>8</sup>. This can include staff and if staff are not confident with digital skills, they will not be confident to support service users.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

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<sup>8</sup> Lloyds [Consumer Digital Index](#), 2022.