

Centre for Ageing Better – Written Evidence (LOL0051)

About the Centre for Ageing Better

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. By 2050, one in four people will be over 65.¹ The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we want everyone to enjoy later life. We create change in policy and practice informed by evidence and work with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities. Our focus is on those approaching later life, which we loosely define as people aged 50-70. We are a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, and part of the government's What Works Network.

Introduction

Those approaching later life, aged 50-70, already make up around a quarter of the population in England – over 14 million people.² We believe that in order to have a good later life, people need to be able to establish certain foundations in mid-life. These are: financial security, good health, social connections, and to have meaning and purpose in their lives.

COVID-19 has spurred many more people to get online or to use the internet in new ways compared to before the outbreak. For example, among 50-70 year olds, three quarters (75%) say they were making video calls more often during lockdown and three in ten (31%) said they were emailing more than they did before the pandemic struck.³ A survey by Lloyds Bank found that three times more 70-year-olds registered for online banking during lockdown compared to the same time last year.⁴

At the same time, the pandemic has further exposed and deepened the divide between the digital haves and have nots. There is a huge cohort of over 50s who will be impacted in the long-term because they are not online and may never get

¹ ONS (2019) Living longer and old-age dependency – what does the future hold? <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ageing/article/livinglongerandoldagedependencywhatdoesthefuturehold/2019-06-24>

² ONS (2020) Population estimates for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2019 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2019estimates>

³ Ipsos MORI & The Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'The experience of people approaching later life in lockdown: The impact of COVID-19 on 50-70-year olds in England'. Available from: <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/experience-people-approaching-later-life-lockdown-impact-covid-19-50-70-year-olds>

⁴ Lloyds Bank (2020), 'Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020'. Available from: https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/lb-consumer-digital-index-2020-report.pdf

online, or because their ability to access and use the internet is limited. Many activities, information and services have moved exclusively online without offering offline alternatives or with offline alternatives being limited or restricted. This has placed those without digital access at even greater risk of missing out than before the outbreak – many of whom are in mid to later life. People who are digitally excluded should be an important part of the inquiry and we urge the COVID-19 Select Committee to ensure they are considered.

People in mid to later life are at a greater risk of being on the wrong side of the digital divide

In general, there has been a rapid increase in the numbers of people aged 55 and over who are now online. For example, in 2011, just over half (52%) of people aged 65-74 had recently used the internet. This figure jumped to eight in ten (83%) by 2019.⁵

Despite these increases, many people still are not online, and age remains the biggest predictor of whether or not someone is digitally included. In 2019, there were 4 million people who had never used the internet. Of these, the vast majority (3.7 million) are aged 55 and over,⁶ and 52% of those are aged between 60-70.⁷

Those who are not online are not just older, they are also likely to be in worse health, poorer and less well educated than their peers: 71% of those offline have no more than a secondary education, and nearly half (47%) are from low-income households.⁸ These individuals often have a key benefit to being online, but have limited or no access to offline alternatives and are disadvantaged because of it. For example, workers who are digitally enabled earn, on average, an additional of £2,160 per year compared to workers who are not digitally enabled.⁹

Digital exclusion is not just a short-term problem

Digital exclusion is likely to remain a problem in the future for several reasons:

⁵ Office for National Statistics (2019), 'Internet users, UK: 2019'. Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2019>

⁶ Office for National Statistics (2019), 'Internet users, UK: 2019'. Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2019>

⁷ Lloyds Bank (2020), 'Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020'. Available from: https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/lb-consumer-digital-index-2020-report.pdf

⁸ Lloyds Bank (2019), 'UK Consumer Digital Index 2019'. Available from: https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/LB-Consumer-Digital-Index-2019-Report.pdf

⁹ Lloyds Bank (2019), 'UK Consumer Digital Index 2019'. Available from: https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/LB-Consumer-Digital-Index-2019-Report.pdf

- Many of those currently not online will remain offline – a lot of whom will live another 20 or 30 years. A survey done by Lloyds Bank found that almost half (48%) of those digitally excluded said ‘nothing’ could motivate them to get online.¹⁰
- There will be a residual core that will always struggle to get online regardless of age – a fifth of those who have not used the internet within the past three months are under the age of 50. These are often people from less educated and lower socioeconomic backgrounds or who have learning difficulties.
- Digital technology is continually developing and therefore has the potential to continue to leave people behind. Retirement is often a key timepoint when exposure to or usage of technology changes or reduces.

The nature of digital exclusion is also changing. Now, and even more so in the future, it is less about whether you have the capability to get online and more about what you are doing online and how useful this is to your life. For example, someone may own a smartphone and be able to video call their family members, but they may still lack the skills to access online banking or book a health appointment online.

The Centre for Ageing Better has recently commissioned a research project to understand the ongoing effect of the pandemic on digital skills training for older people. It will explore whether training groups have moved online or closed for the period, what has been the effect on users, and what good practice has been learned. Our research will be reported in March 2021.

Wellbeing

Evidence on the long-term effects of reliance on digital technology is limited, particularly for the 50-70 age group. Although there have been some studies on how being online can help improve quality of life in the short-term, evidence on longer term wellbeing has been very mixed.¹¹ Recent evidence indicates our increased reliance on digital technology and limited access or ability with technology are major risk factors for depression and loneliness for older adults.¹²

Digital technology is not a panacea and cannot replace face-to-face relationships. We need to identify how, for whom and when using technology is most beneficial and overcome the shortcomings of current studies that use small sample sizes, mixed success criteria and various intervention methods that are

¹⁰ Lloyds Bank (2020), ‘Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020’. Available from: https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/lb-consumer-digital-index-2020-report.pdf

¹¹ Age UK (2018) Digital inclusion evidence review 2018

¹² Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group (2020) COVID-19 and social exclusion: experiences of older people living in areas of multiple deprivation

not comparable. Nevertheless, without addressing the digital divide, inequalities across generations and regions will increase as we continue to rely on digital technology.

Health

Social distancing measures have meant many more people spending more time at home and for many, as a result, becoming more sedentary and less physically active. During lockdown a third of people in this age group said they did more exercise (31%), but a similar proportion actually reduced their activity levels (28% said they did less exercise).¹³ This is likely to contribute to widening health inequalities – with those on lower incomes, people living alone and people in more urban areas finding it harder to stay active.

A massive number of online resources have been developed to support people to remain physically active while at home. Although some resources have been developed for people who aren't online – for example exercise classes on the radio or TV or leaflets distributed to people's homes¹⁴ – these are significantly more limited in variety and harder to access offline. An evaluation of one of the leaflets produced, which surveyed older adults who received a copy, found that even among people who did have online access many preferred having hard copies.

The pandemic also moved many more consultations with healthcare professionals to a virtual setting.¹⁵ A shift in provision of healthcare services to digital platforms often excludes those who are older and poorer. An evaluation of the GP At Hand service found that the patients who took up the service were younger (94% aged under 45) and two-thirds were living in areas with high proportions of affluent categories. They were also typically healthier than the average.¹⁶

In terms of mental health, our research with Ipsos MORI found that the increasing role of technology meant people were overexposed to news about the pandemic¹⁷. As such, the devices used to facilitate social interaction also had the potential to be detrimental to emotional wellbeing and stress.

¹³ Centre for Ageing Better (2020) 'Learning from lockdown'. Available from: <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-09/Learning-from-lockdown-report.pdf>

¹⁴ Public Health England (2020), 'Active at Home'. Available at: <https://campaignresources.phe.gov.uk/resources/campaigns/50-resource-ordering/resources/5118>

¹⁵ Guardian (2020), 'GP appointments by phone and video surge during coronavirus lockdown', 5 July 2020. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jul/05/gp-appointments-phone-video-coronavirus-lockdown-nhs>

¹⁶ Ipsos MORI and York Health Economics Consortium (2019), 'Evaluation of Babylon GP at hand'. Available from: <https://www.hammersmithfulhamccg.nhs.uk/media/156123/Evaluation-of-Babylon-GP-at-Hand-Final-Report.pdf>

¹⁷ Ipsos MORI (2020) 'The experiences of people approaching later life in lockdown: The impact of COVID-19 on 50-70 year olds in England. Available from <https://www.ageing->

The Institute for Employment Studies published some early findings from the impact of the lockdown on health and wellbeing of remote workers.¹⁸ They showed there has been a significant increase in musculoskeletal problems, 60% were exercising less, 30% were eating less healthily and 48% reported working patterns that include long or irregular hours. We know that many of these health impacts such as MSK are particularly associated with older workers and can be a driver for early exit from the labour market. Although the health sector has been encouraging exercise at home, employers need to ensure their working practices are supporting workers' health and not creating long-term problems.

Work

Our analysis with the Learning and Work Institute has shown that one in four older workers – 2.5 million in total – have been furloughed, and hundreds of thousands of these workers may be unable to return to their previous jobs as some sectors struggle to recover.¹⁹ With unprecedented numbers of people unemployed due to the pandemic and many stuck at home during lockdown, being able to search for and apply to jobs online from home has been crucial.

Yet many people over 50 still rely on word of mouth and adverts to look for job roles. Only 24% of people aged 50-59 use the internet to find a job, compared to 60% of 18-24 year olds.²⁰ Less digitally confident jobseekers will struggle to search for and apply to jobs online.²¹ Those who rely on computers at libraries or community centres for online access that closed during lockdown will have struggled to search for and apply to jobs. With social distancing measures still in place, many interviews have moved online, leaving those who are digitally excluded at a significant disadvantage.

When the pandemic began and the first lockdown measures were implemented, many elements of employment support moved online or to video calls. Centre for Ageing Better research found that some older adults without access to a computer or unable to confidently use one were not able to fully take up remote support.²² Most Jobcentres continued to assist those unable to get online but

[better.org.uk/publications/experience-people-approaching-later-life-lockdown-impact-covid-19-50-70-year-olds](https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/experience-people-approaching-later-life-lockdown-impact-covid-19-50-70-year-olds)

¹⁸ IES (2020) Working at Home Wellbeing Survey <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/ies-working-home-wellbeing-survey>

¹⁹ Centre for Ageing Better and Learning and Work Institute (2020), 'A mid-life employment crisis: How COVID-19 will affect the job prospects of older workers'. Available from: <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/mid-life-employment-crisis-how-covid-19-will-affect-job-prospects-older>

²⁰ Lloyds Bank (2019), 'Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2019'.

²¹ Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'Back on track: Improving employment support for over 50s jobseekers'. Available from: <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/back-track-improving-employment-support-over-50s-jobseekers>

²² Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'Back on track: Improving employment support for over 50s jobseekers'. Available from: <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/back-track-improving-employment-support-over-50s-jobseekers>

only provided basic support, had shorter calls and could not help with job searches or applications. As restrictions on face to face interactions continue, Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches and Employment Advisors will need to be trained on how to support their clients back into work through remote and digital support.

With conditionality re-introduced for Universal Credit, proof of job search will be required for claimants. Digitally excluded older adults could be at risk of losing their benefit entitlement if they can't easily prove they've been searching for jobs. Those without online access and digital skills will have received the least support to search for and apply to jobs and yet will be at highest risk of losing their benefits.

Centre for Ageing Better research found that while many older workers are confident using digital devices for social purposes, they are less confident using them for work-based tasks, leaving them at a significant disadvantage in the job market.²³ If unemployment due to the pandemic continues to rise and industries that were already in decline do not recover, access to digital skills will be even more important for those seeking to retrain.

Community participation and social connections

When the pandemic hit, many public services and community groups switched to using digital technology to support communities, engage volunteers, and share data and integrate services. For example, Barnsley Council installed video systems and user guides to over 100 old laptops and iPads to distribute to care homes in the borough.²⁴ In Leeds, after discovering many of its members had never been on a video call before, one neighbourhood network provided over the phone training sessions on how to use Zoom for video calling so that members could join online coffee mornings, quizzes, IT classes and singing groups.²⁵ Despite the risks of a digital divide, particularly for older people,²⁶ it will be important to build on these innovative approaches, to capitalise on the new forms of online engagement and continue to find ways to make these online services accessible to all. Nevertheless, the long-term impacts of these measures in reducing social isolation are very mixed. Although there are limited studies on older cohorts, studies on younger adults show that people who rely

²³ Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'Back on track: Improving employment support for over 50s jobseekers'. Available from: <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/publications/back-track-improving-employment-support-over-50s-jobseekers>

²⁴ Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'How Barnsley is using recycled tech to support its local care homes'. Available from: <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/case-studies/how-barnsley-using-recycled-tech-support-local-care-homes>

²⁵ Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'How Leeds is utilising virtual coffee mornings during the COVID-19 pandemic'. Available from: <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/case-studies/how-leeds-utilising-virtual-coffee-mornings-covid-pandemic>

²⁶ Richardson, J (2018) I am connected: new approaches to supporting people in later life online <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-06/i-am-connected-good-things.pdf>

on digital feel more socially isolated and actually decrease their social connections in real life.^{27 28}

Charities have also played a key role in reaching digitally excluded groups so they don't miss out on important information, and they can also help people access the technology and support to improve their skills. Lack of digital skills or access to technology significantly heightens inequalities and it's vital the community and voluntary sector and Local Government get the support to ensure people aren't left behind.

The move to virtual banking, shopping and public services was already occurring before the pandemic struck, but this trend was massively accelerated during the coronavirus outbreak. As many services move to 'digital by default', it's important for service providers to remember their responsibility to people who are offline. With tight budgets and lack of investment, service providers should not view closing offline services as a solution to budget constraints and should sustain multiple ways for people to access. Local authorities in particular have a statutory role to play to futureproof communities experiencing demographic and digital shifts.

Recommendations

There is an urgent need to address the digital divide – exacerbated by COVID-19 – that has led to countless numbers of people missing out on access to essential services, information and support online.

These recommendations are for national government, local authorities, funders and providers of online training and support and for any businesses or organisations delivering online services.

- **Make provisions for those not online:** Government, public and community services and businesses must remember their responsibility to those who are not online. They should offer support or an offline equivalent (e.g. via telephone) for people without the necessary digital skills or technology. Important communications such as public health messages related to COVID-19 should be distributed in paper form in key locations such as supermarkets, libraries and GP surgeries, and in the event of future lockdowns, finding ways of directly contacting individuals who aren't able to leave their home.

²⁷ Primack, B.A., Shensa, A., Sidani, J.E., Whaite, E.O., Yi Lin, L., Rosen, D., Colditz, J.B., Radovic, A. and Miller, E., 2017. Social media use and perceived social isolation among young adults in the US. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 53(1), pp.1-8.

²⁸ Kushlev, K., Proulx, J.D. and Dunn, E.W., 2017. Digitally connected, socially disconnected: The effects of relying on technology rather than other people. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 76, pp.68- 74.

- **Make technology accessible:** Hardware and websites must be designed in an accessible way –something that can be used by as many people as possible, regardless of environment, device being used, age, ability or cultural background.
- **Provide equipment and internet access:** National government and local authorities should commit to universal access to the internet by working to expand access to broadband, data/telephone packages, and to computer and IT packages, in particular for individuals and families on low incomes who have the greatest need and are most likely to be digitally excluded.
- **Invest in building digital skills:** Making sure digital services are accessible and providing access to equipment and the internet will not be effective if people cannot use the technology or if they see tech as a barrier. Government and service providers should invest in schemes to support those who are digitally excluded to get online using good practice. such as those developed with the Good Things Foundation, Citizens Online, Digital Unite, and Barclays.
- **Provide a central resource bank for digital champions:** There is a wealth of resources available for anyone providing digital training or support, but those new to providing support are often unaware of what is available. Government should promote joined up working for anyone supporting digital inclusion and should create a resource bank that signposts to all the available resources from one central place.
- **Integrate digital skill assessments into other support:** Providers of services – for example employment or GP services – should look at assessing digital skills as part of other support services. This would help identify individuals who aren't online and need help and then offering support or signposting them to interventions.

10 December 2020