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Digital exclusion hot topic at NPC Convention 2023 in Blackpool



*There were few spare seats at the breakaway session, *The Future is Digital: Making it Work for Us All*, which provided an alternative to the Convention's main session on pensions*

Publication of a House of Lords committee report which found the government was "failing on Digital Exclusion" couldn't have been better timed, appearing on the same morning as the NPC Convention's session on digital exclusion and inclusion, writes Jenny Sims.

The Lords communications and digital committee said the government was allowing "millions of citizens to fall behind" because services were moving online at an "unprecedented" rate, but significant numbers of people lacked the skills and means to get online.

It pointed out half of people aged over 75 lacked basic skills and 1 million people had cancelled their broadband in the last year because of the rising cost of living, according to Age Concern.

But where the government is failing, some older people's organisations are stepping in to provide practical help and solutions, including Age UK and the Digital Poverty Alliance. (See inside pages for details).

The session heard from Thomas Lowe, head of policy and communications at the Digital Policy Alliance about its newly launched National Plan to end digital poverty by 2030.

And Sarah Parkes, an Age UK programme manager, explained its volunteer Digital Champions scheme helping older people get online.

The Lords report concludes "digital exclusion remains a serious problem" and it calls for urgent government action.

See page 2 recommendations.



For the first time since the digital working party was set up in 2019 it had a stand at an NPC annual convention. Members Jenny Sims (right) and David Brooks handed out newsletters, answered questions and encouraged people to take part in a survey.

EDITORIAL

This is a special issue in which digital exclusion looms large. The House of Lords committee report on digital exclusion could fill an issue of its own - it's so relevant to our campaign, *Connections for All*.

Many of its findings and recommendations confirm much of what we have been warning about, older people are and will be left further behind by digitalisation – unless government action is taken. This is now urgent!

This issue's also special because we're reporting on a "first" for the NPC Annual Convention – a breakaway session on digital exclusion and inclusion.

This was in contrast to the Lords "gloom and doom" report, Positive news and constructive plans were presented Age UK and the Digital Poverty Alliance on ending digital poverty and how digital champions are helping older people.

Thanks to the members who completed the survey we carried out during the Convention. We had a good response, and based on the findings we will be producing a report and recommendations.

Jenny Sims

Chair, Digital Working Party

Lords "Digital Exclusion" Recommendations

Digital exclusion remains a serious problem the committee warned in its summary of conclusions and recommendations.

It said although there has been progress in recent years, millions of people still cannot access the internet or use it adequately. For some, skills and motivation are the main barriers. For others, affordability is the key obstacle. Others face barriers around accessibility, or poor mobile and broadband coverage. These groups face deepening isolation as society becomes increasingly digital.

The economic case for government intervention was clear, but there was also a strong civic case. It would "help ensure many of the most vulnerable in society have a voice at a time when political debate and engagement are increasingly moving online."

It recommended: *The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should work with the Treasury and external stakeholders to publish (a) an assessment of the likely economic impact of digital exclusion over the next 10 years; and (b) value for money assessments of interventions to narrow the digital divide.*

Other recommendations covered affordable internet access, connectivity and access, digital skills for work and life, and access to services. These include:

Ofcom reviews the adequacy of the Universal Service Obligation and definition of a "decent broadband service", taking into account the potential impact on private and Government investment that would arise from any changes.

The committee welcomed "recent improvements in the availability and awareness of social tariffs" but pointed out "take up stands at just five per cent."

They said: "We urge internet providers to do more to increase social tariff uptake and review whether their current promotional strategies are delivering results. Ofcom should provide a clearer expectation of what constitutes a social tariff and work with providers, consumer organisations and comparison websites to make it easier for customers to compare deals. Ofcom should be empowered to regulate how and where companies advertise social tariffs, and hold them accountable."

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5803/ldselect/ldcomm/219/21902.htm>

Six missions in DPA National Plan to end digital poverty

A six-mission strategy has been agreed to take forward the Digital Poverty Alliance's ambitious National Plan to end digital poverty by 2030, Thomas Lowe, its head of policy and communications has revealed.

A panel speaker at the NPC Convention's digital session in Blackpool, Lowe explained: "The DPA a charitable coalition convening individuals and organisations from across business, government, charity and education, with the sole aim of eradicating digital poverty in the UK, and ultimately globally."

He defined digital poverty as: "The inability to interact with the online world, when, where and how an individual needs to."

However, he stressed that "people's choices should be respected" and it had to be accepted being online wasn't for everyone. He also warned that digital exclusion "isn't static" and anyone could be affected in their lifetime. The six missions are:

1. Increase awareness across society about the need for sustainable and strategic action to end digital poverty.
2. Ensure affordable connectivity and guarantee full digital access for those in need.
3. Improve standards of accessibility, safety, and inclusiveness across all digital products and services.
4. By 2030, significantly reduce the proportion of individuals without essential digital skills and ensure the sustainability, and expansion, of these skills in response to changing technologies and needs.
5. Enhance knowledge and understanding of digital poverty among all stakeholders, including citizens, governments, and the public and private sectors, through the development and utilisation of research.
6. Increase local capacity to provide joined-up digital inclusion support to individuals and communities.

It has five actions:

- Ensure offline options are protected for people engaging with essential services.
- Improve signposting and support available to people for informal support with technology.
- Advocate for action on affordability of digital devices and connectivity, especially in the context of the cost-of-living crisis.
- Ensure that the voice of those who are digitally excluded are included in the conversation around technological change.
- Work with a group of organisations including AGE UK, NPC and Independent Age to develop a joint policy position on digital inclusion and older people.

The DPA is setting up a National Development Committee to co-ordinate activities, and integrate the six missions into a "pledge journey," and will publish an updated version of the National Plan annually.

End Digital Poverty Day 12 September

Join the fight against digital poverty on End Digital Poverty Day, a nationwide Digital Poverty Alliance initiative dedicated to raising awareness about the pressing issue of digital poverty in the UK.

Here's how you can get involved: volunteer, fundraise, spread awareness, attend events, run an event, share on social media using hashtag #EndDigitalPoverty Day. Write a blog about why ending digital poverty matters to you.

bit.ly/44yQNnl

Digital Champions help older people embrace technology

Many older people are being inspired and helped to go online through the help of Age UK's Digital Champions programme.

In a presentation to the NPC Convention's session, The Future is Digital: Making it work for us all, Sarah Parkes, programme manager, Age UK, listed the likely factors putting some people at risk of being "digitally excluded."

They include those: on lower income; aged over 80 years old; living alone; living with mobility challenges; problems with memory; from an ethnic minority group, and older people who identify as LGBT+.

But she said: "It's not all doom and gloom. With various support provisions in place, we can support older people to access the many benefits of being online."

Age UK launched the Digital Champion Programme in 2022 having obtained funding for five years. It involves 50 local Age UK's across England and Wales.

"It stems from years of experience of delivering digital inclusion services for older people, learning what works, what doesn't, and how we can best support older people to make the most of being online," said Parkes.

By 2026, the Digital Champion Programme will have: recruited and trained 600 volunteer Digital Champions; delivered awareness-raising activities to 120,000 older people to inspire and motivate them to get online; loaned technology to approximately 3,000 older people, and assisted 15,000 older people through digital skills sessions to improve their digital confidence and develop new digital skills.

It is already having a positive impact. Amongst older people who have engaged so far, AgeUK has seen: Increased usage, knowledge, motivation and confidence; improved social connections; improved engagement with leisure activities; improved mental wellbeing and financial benefits.

A number of videos were shown which included interviews with Digital Champions and people who had been helped. Among the video "stars" was Dereck Roberts, chair of NPC Wales, and a trained Digital Champion, who was among the attendees watching the presentations. "I was surprised to see myself on screen. Age UK hadn't given me any notice" he admitted afterwards.

This month (July) Age UK will be launching its Digital Champion e-learning programme. Find out more about Digital Champions at <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/discover/2021/june/digital-champions/>

Tell the Commissioner

Heléna Herklots, CBE, the Older People's Commissioner for Wales, is inviting older people who have struggled to access information, services or other amenities due to being digitally excluded to get in touch with her to share their experiences, so she can identify particular difficulties and barriers people are facing, and areas where action is required.

The Commissioner's call for evidence from older people comes following the publication of formal guidance in 2021 which set out the kinds of action local authorities and health boards should be taking to ensure that people's rights to access information and services via non-digital means are upheld.

"Hearing these voices and experiences will enable me to identify areas where further action may be required to ensure older people who are digitally excluded can access the information and services they need, and support my work to influence the practice of key public bodies, including local authorities and health boards," she said.

Older people (or their family and friends) can contact the Commissioner's office to share their experiences until 1 September by phone, in writing or via the Commissioner's website. <https://olderpeople.wales/>

Cambrian Buildings, Mount Stuart Square,
Butetown, Cardiff CF10 5FL
Phone: 03442 640 670
Email: ask@olderpeople.wales



Would you like your say in the future of digital healthcare?

Over the years we have seen healthcare services becoming more digitalised. For example, during COVID lots of people were only able to speak to their doctor over a video call or phone call, and the NHS app became more useful as we were able to retrieve our covid passports.

It is amazing technology can support our healthcare like this, and we will probably see more amazing ways of how technology can improve our healthcare over the coming years. However, the use of technology to help our healthcare service is excluding lots of people for various reasons.

For example, people may be experiencing financial difficulties leading to some people been unable to afford broadband at home, people may not be fluent in English and struggle with the jargon associated with the technology, and people may have disabilities such as sight loss which can prevent or made it very hard to read information presented on apps.

My work explores how we can make digital health service more accessible to everyone and support the future of healthcare as it becomes more digitalised. So far, I have been busy examining some strategies that have been used in different countries that have the potential to help make digital healthcare more accessible.

To make sure these strategies meet a wide range of individual's needs, I would really like to hear your thoughts on them during a one-to-one chat. This will help us build some recommendations to improve digital health services.

If you are interested or would like to find out more please contact me:

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Protest at closure of supermarket manned tills

Pensioners in Hornsey North London are angry at the closure of manned check-out tills at a local supermarket. They wrote to the local paper explaining why this discriminates against older people: many having sight or mobility problems need help from staff. Their arguments can be read at <https://www.hamhigh.co.uk/news/23550478.pensioners-group-says-self-service-tills-discriminatory/>

Another group has gone further and launched a petition. Pat McCarthy, an active member of the Hillingdon and Hounslow branch of the Unite Community Union, started her petition on Change.org last year, and it has now been signed by more than 240,000 people.

<https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/?s=tesco+inaccessible+tills>.

Janet Shapiro

NEWS IN BRIEF



Ticket office closures

The NPC is opposing plans to close 1,000 rail ticket offices in England and has responded to the Transport Focus & London Travelwatch consultation on the proposals.

Jan Shortt, General Secretary, said: "We have no intention of allowing these plans to be pushed through and will campaign robustly against them."

The consultation ends on 26th July.

<https://www.rmt.org.uk/campaigns/rail/save-ticket-offices/>

Spot a scam

How to spot a fake or fraudulent website or email scam and get advice on phone scams. See

<https://www.which.co.uk/consumer-rights/advice/how-to-spot-a-scam-alFiz5h8mnJ9>

Get tech confident

A poll conducted for BT Group found that older people want to build their digital confidence and identified the top tech tasks people are and are not willing to do. AbilityNet has been working with BT to provide free one-to-one digital skills training for over-65s across the UK. Free helpline 0800 048 048 7642 or find out more at <https://abilitynet.org.uk/news-blogs/bt-group-partnership-boosts-digital-skills-older-people>

Digital Derbyshire

NPC East Midlands Region has been helping raise awareness among members in Derbyshire about the widespread help and advice about digital inclusion on offer. This has included making the Derbyshire Digital Inclusion Network's newsletter available in print and online. More information at: www.ruralactionderbyshire.org.uk?digital or 01629-592970.

Liverpool Digital Inclusion Network

Liverpool City Region Combined Authority has set up a Digital Inclusion Network involving a wide range of public, private and community sector organisations. Mayor Steve Rotheram said it is aimed at helping more people in the area get online for services such as accessing support from the public sector.

[ps://www.ukauthority.com/articles/liverpool-authority-sets-up-digital-inclusion-network/](https://www.ukauthority.com/articles/liverpool-authority-sets-up-digital-inclusion-network/)

Find a digital hub near you

The National Digital Inclusion Network is made up of thousands of community partners in the UK, all working to tackle digital exclusion by delivering data, devices and digital skills training. Use their map find out what services are available at a Hub near you.

<https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/our-network-services-map/>