CENTRE FOR AGEING BETTER

The digital age: new approaches to supporting people in later life get online

Centre for Ageing Better

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About the Centre for Ageing Better

The Centre for Ageing Better was set up in 2015 and is funded by an endowment from the Big Lottery Fund. We are part of the network of What Works organisations that promote the better use of evidence.

We bring about change for people in later life today and for future generations. Practical solutions, research about what works best and people's own insight are all sources that we draw on to help make this change. We share this information and support others to act on it. We also try out new approaches to improving later lives.

About Good Things Foundation

Good Things Foundation is a leading social change charity, working in thousands of local communities both nationally and internationally. They're committed to helping people to improve their lives through digital, and they help people to grow their resilience and self-efficacy – both through gaining new skills and in other areas of their lives.

Through the 5,000-strong hyperlocal Online Centres Network – comprising organisations as diverse as small local charities, libraries, community groups and social housing providers – Good Things Foundation supports some of the most excluded adults in society today, helping them to improve their digital skills, financial capability, health and wellbeing, and their ability to integrate with their communities

This report was written by Jemma Mouland, Senior Programme Manager, based on research conducted by Good Things Foundation (full report available online). We would like to thank James Richardson for his work on this research and Leela Damadoran for her contributions in reviewing the research findings.

Good Things Foundation

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Executive summary

There are now more people online in later life than ever before. The proportion of older people using the internet has risen rapidly; in 2018 more than twice as many people over 75 used the internet as in 2011 (ONS, 2018).

Yet despite these increases, 4.2 million people over the age of 55 have never been online. Over 55s make up 94% of everyone who has never been online (4.5 million people), and a further 684,000 used to be online but no longer are. These people – who are already likely to be poorer, less well educated and in worse health than their peers – are at risk of being left on the wrong side of the digital divide, as more services and information move online.

As more aspects of life become digitised and technology continues to develop, the meaning of 'digital inclusion' will shift and become less about whether you are online or not and more about what online activity you are carrying out and how. It is likely those in later life will continue to fall behind – now and in the future.

Digital exclusion in later life is not a problem that is going to disappear in the future.

In 2017 the Centre for Ageing Better (Ageing Better) grant-funded Good Things Foundation to conduct research to understand the reasons behind people's digital behaviour in later life and the implications for policy and practice. This research highlighted a need for a fundamental re-think of digital inclusion policy and practice for people in later life:

- **We need to reframe 'digital exclusion' and target those who have the greatest need for the internet and are missing out by not being online** – not using the internet is different from 'digital exclusion'. Some non-users have made an informed and reasoned choice to be offline. Many also access online services and information through family, friends and other trusted intermediaries. In contrast, digitally excluded people have no means of accessing the benefits of the digital world – they often have the greatest need to access digital services, but they are the least able to do so.
- **We must shift the focus away from simply achieving 'basic digital skills' and towards enabling people to do the things they need and want to online** – the internet is an enabler of access to information, services, better deals and cheaper goods, and can help to improve wellbeing, access to social connections, financial security and health. 'Basic digital skills' are not ends in themselves, and for many are neither the problem nor the solution. Developing confidence to use the internet and a perceived value in doing so are the key issues to address.

- **We need to better understand the barriers to digital inclusion** – while a lack of interest is a common self-reported explanation of non-use amongst older non-users, it may not be the primary barrier. Rather, it may mask a complex range of underlying barriers such as low confidence and misunderstanding of the internet. Whether older people participate in online activity will depend on their personal circumstances, confidence in their ability to use the internet and individual perception of the internet and its value. Policy and practice needs to be based on a more nuanced understanding of what drives an individual's willingness and ability to use the internet.
- **We need a wider range of outreach strategies** – the drivers and enablers of engagement are different for different people, and at different times. For example, crises such as losing a job, a deteriorating health condition or becoming a carer can change the balance of need and interest for an individual. We need proactive approaches to outreach, such as embedding digital inclusion support within different local services, and support that can respond in more timely and personalised ways.
- **We need to offer more intensive, person-centred and open-ended support** – rigid and time-limited provision is a false economy in supporting people in later life get online. Whilst family members can offer one-to-one support, they generally make for poor teachers. Investment in responsive, personalised and ongoing community-based support is essential.

Our research identified a clear need and opportunity for change in digital inclusion policy, funding and practice. Recommendations include:

Government should:

- **Look beyond 'basic digital skills' in the UK Digital Strategy section on skills and inclusion** – a strategy based on increasing basic digital skills will fail to address the fundamental barriers to digital engagement in later life.
- **Recognise that some people will not get online** – digital inclusion policy needs to recognise that for some, getting online is neither urgent nor a priority. We should ensure that people who are not online do not lose out as a result.
- **Use Local Digital Skills Partnerships as testbeds** – local partnerships should develop and trial innovative models of engagement, outreach and embedded support.

Funders should:

- **Measure success by attainment of non-digital outcomes** – measures should focus on non-digital outcomes such as improved access to health information or increased wellbeing, rather than numbers attaining 'digital skills'.
- **Trial and invest in higher-cost, long-term, personalised support** – provide funding for lower volume delivery models with higher per capita cost that allow for one-to-one, long-term support should be trialled to assess cost-effectiveness.
- **Fund digital support as a component of social inclusion activities** – provide funding for community services to deliver digital support as part of their overall service offer. Anyone supporting older people in difficult circumstances should be able to identify if and how digital can help an individual and provide the appropriate support.
- **Trial and invest in new models such as peer-to-peer support** – specific funding should be allocated to trial and evaluate promising models such as peer-to-peer digital inclusion.

Providers of digital inclusion support should:

- **Make co-production standard practice** – marketing materials and delivery models should be co-designed with the target audience to ensure that the offer is attractive and the support is effective.
- **Take a flexible, person-centred approach to support** – a flexible, person-centred approach is essential in building confidence and maintaining interest. Spending time understanding an individual's personal circumstances, interests and needs is vital.
- **Explore partnership opportunities** – digital inclusion practitioners from private, public and third sector organisations should seek opportunities to deliver digital inclusion support in partnership with other local public and community services, to maximise reach and avoid duplication.

Recommendations continued:

Organisations delivering services online should:

- **Consider how to support service users to engage with online services** – private, public and third sector service providers should consider their responsibility to people who are offline, as well as how to support non-users in engaging with online services.
- **Ensure there are alternative routes for people to access services** – even with a strong support offer, not everyone will be able to independently access services online. Service providers must develop and sustain multiple ways of accessing services.

Introduction

There are now more people online in later life than ever before. Over the last several years, the proportion of older people using the internet has risen considerably faster than for the general population; in 2018, more than twice as many people over 75 used the internet as they did in 2011 (ONS, 2018).

Despite recent rapid increases, there are still 4.8 million people over the age of 55 who are not online, making up 91% of the population who are not online (5.3 million people).

These people – who are already likely to be poorer, less well educated and in worse health than their peers – are at risk of being left on the wrong side of the digital divide, as more services and information move online.

People in later life stand to benefit hugely from being online – to improve health and wellbeing, save money and keep in touch with family and friends. However, there remains a core of people in later life who are not online and have no intention of getting online. When asked what would prompt them to go online, 74% of people over the age of 65 responded 'nothing' (Ofcom, 2018).

In 2017 Ageing Better funded Good Things Foundation to conduct research to understand what enables and prevents people in later life from getting online – focusing specifically on people in later life who have never used the internet, those who used to but have now stopped or those who have limited usage.

This report sets out the key insights from the research and Ageing Better's view on their implications for policymakers, funders, digital inclusion support providers and service providers.

> "My son said, 'you've got to move in with the times'. I said, 'why? Is all the shops going to shut? Is all the banks going to close?'

Note: photos used in this report are not necessarily of those whose stories are presented

Digital engagement in later life

Despite rapid increases in the number of older adults online, lower levels of internet use in later life will likely continue for the foreseeable future.

The current cohort who are not online will remain offline for many years

The cohort of people in later life with limited exposure to the internet and digital technologies has a long tail-end. The millions of people in their 50s and 60s who are not online can expect to live a further 20 to 30 years and will continue to do so without being digitally connected unless better support is provided.

Many people under the age of 55 have had limited exposure to the internet

Arround 289,000 people under the age of 55 have never been online (ONS, 2018). Many more lack the basic skills and understanding to fully engage with the digital world (Lloyds Bank, 2018).

These individuals will continue to face difficulties, and may even face greater difficulties, in using the internet in later life. Without the impetus of work to keep them engaged in the digital world or access to support to develop their digital skills, their engagement with the digital world will be likely to decline.

There is a residual core who will always struggle to get online

The 2014 Digital Inclusion Strategy estimated that just under 10% of the adult population may never be able to gain basic digital capabilities as a result of complex multiple needs (Cabinet Office/Government Digital Service, 2014). These individuals are typically suffering from multiple disadvantages in terms of health, education and wealth. (Good Things Foundation, 2017).

Digital technology is continually developing and will leave people behind

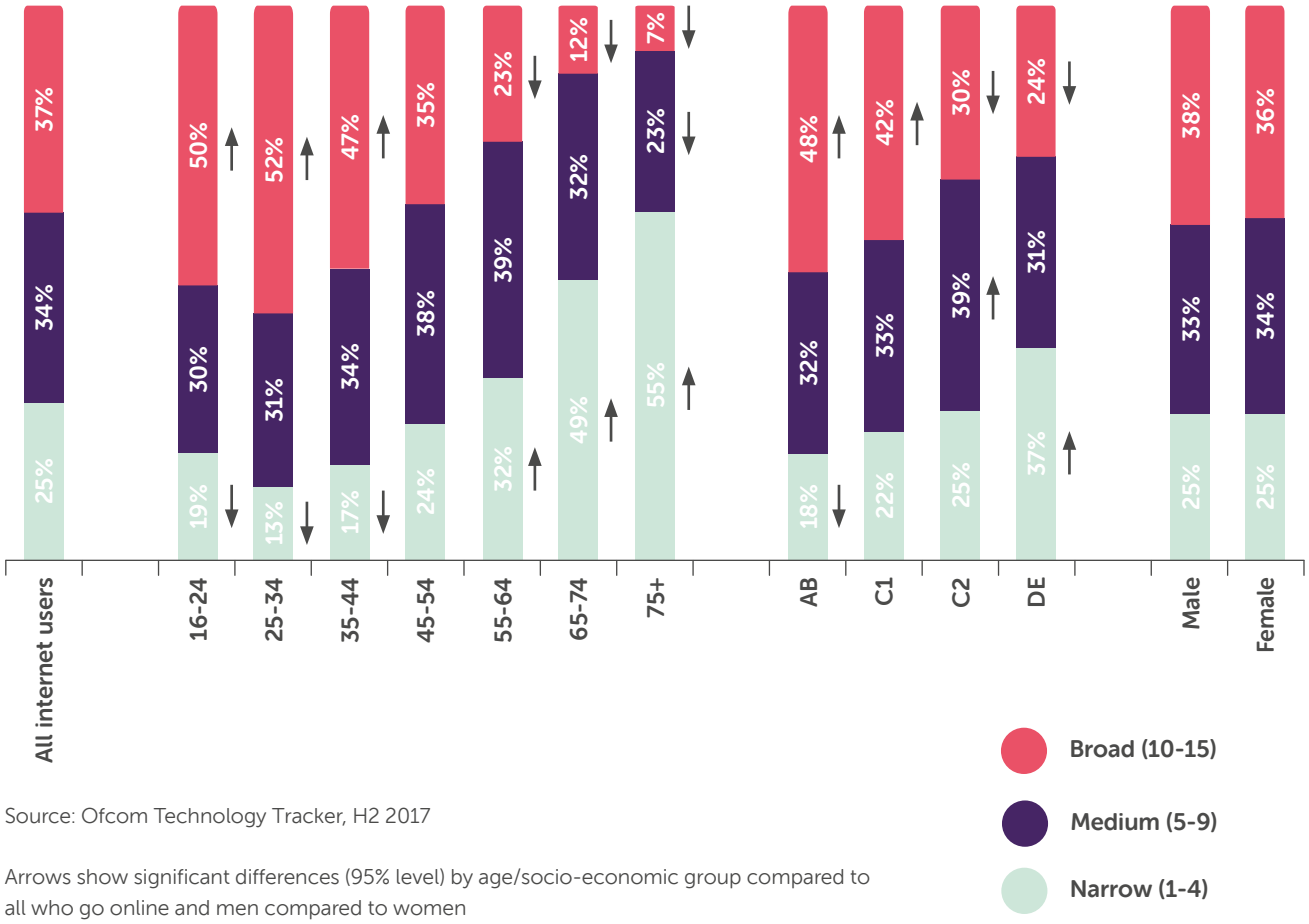
Even for those who are engaged with existing technologies, the pace at which technology develops places significant demands on us to learn new behaviours and skills. Those who were raised in a digital world will still hit these obstacles over time and find new technologies harder to adopt – particularly after leaving the workforce.

Digital exclusion will become less about whether you are online and more about what you are doing online

Not only are there divides in the online and offline populations – there are divides within the online population. Frequency of use, breadth of activities undertaken, the use of appropriate safety measures and critical analysis of online content all decline with age. There are also

distinct socioeconomic differences associated with online behaviour. Both narrow use of the internet and risky online behaviour are much more prevalent amongst those of lower social grades (Ofcom 2018).

Graph 1: Breadth of use of the internet, by demographic group



Source: Ofcom Technology Tracker, H2 2017

Arrows show significant differences (95% level) by age/socio-economic group compared to all who go online and men compared to women

As our services and interactions become increasingly digitised, the meaning of digital inclusion will evolve. The digital divide will become less about whether you are online or offline, and more about what online activity you are carrying out, and how.

The effect of these inequalities is likely to be exacerbated by the growing importance of the internet, and especially social media, for communication and organisation to achieve shared goals, and in influencing social and political opinions and decisions. Without the right skills and knowledge, people will be unable to protect their personal data or effectively search for or interpret online information. They will be more likely to be influenced by the internet rather than influencing it.

Those with poorer educational attainment, in lower skilled jobs and on lower incomes, will continue to be less likely to use digital technology to shape their lives and the world around them. We will therefore need continued attention to support these people – now and into later life.

Accessing the internet through others

Whilst a significant proportion of over 55s are not online, a growing number of people are accessing the benefits of the internet through 'proxies' – individuals who carry out an online activity on another's behalf. More than two in five non-users (44%) have asked someone else to use the internet on their behalf in the past year (Ofcom, 2018).

However, this figure is likely to be much higher in reality. These measures do not include the pervasive proxy use where an individual may not be aware that a family member or friend has found out information about a bus timetable, TV show or the weather from the internet.

> If I wanted anything from the internet my son in law would say 'I'll get it for you and you just give me the money', so that's what we do, we've got an arrangement and it's lovely.

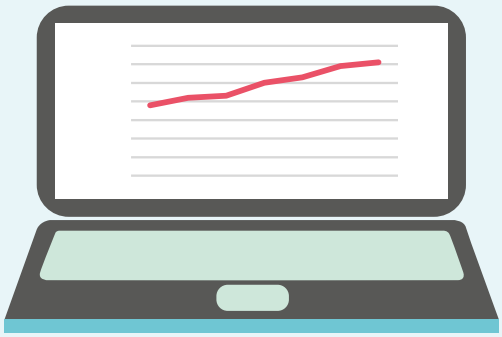
About the research

In 2017 Ageing Better grant-funded Good Things Foundation to conduct a mixed-methods research project to understand the reasons behind people's digital behaviour in later life.

This eight-month project contained several stages of primary and secondary research:

- **Literature review:** a review of published and grey literature was carried out on the usage of internet in later life, proxy usage, drivers of engagement and disengagement.
- **Semi-structured interviews:** interviews were carried out with 27 people aged 55 and over. Individuals were a mixture of current internet users, lapsed users and non-users. Interviews from Good Things Foundation Routes to Inclusion project were also analysed.[1]
- **Observations:** observations in seven venues across the UK were undertaken. These were venues used regularly by older people for social contact, learning and wellbeing, and where digital inclusion activity was – or could be – incorporated.
- **Analysis of quantitative data:** analysis of national datasets including Ofcom's Adult Media Use and Attitudes Survey, the Oxford Internet Survey and Good Things Foundation's ongoing survey of learners in the Online Centres network was undertaken to cross-reference with the qualitative insights from the primary and secondary research.
- **Focus groups:** using insight generated from the primary and secondary research, focus groups were held with groups supporting older people and digital inclusion practitioners to explore potential new strategies for engagement and support.

Internet usage in later life



Despite recent rapid increases in internet usage, there are still 4.8 million people over the age of 55 who are not online*

***Source:** Office for National Statistics (2018)

[1] A longitudinal study of digital learning journeys undertaken by Good Things Foundation in 2017.

Key definitions

Lapsed user: has used the internet but not in the last three months (ONS 2018).

Narrow user: current users who have ever carried out up to four of 15 types of online use (transactions, communications etc.) (Ofcom 2018).

Newer user: started using the internet less than five years ago (Ofcom 2018).

Proxy user: digital use, by mutual consent, undertaken by a third party. The third party will typically have a strong social connection such as a family member or friend. The nature and scope of proxy use can be agreed or may be beyond the scope of the initial request made.

Basic digital skills: the skills needed by all individuals to safely participate in and contribute to the digital world of today and the future. These skills fall under five categories: managing information, communicating, transacting, problem solving and creating (Go ON UK 2015).

Digital inclusion practitioners: any person representing an organisation or group delivering digital inclusion support. This includes a wide range and scale of organisation, type or scale of activity, undertaken in a paid or voluntary capacity.

"I feel a bit embarrassed when there's a load of people there at the computer class, they can do it and I can't, and some people are older than me, and they can do it, but I can't. I just can't get it.

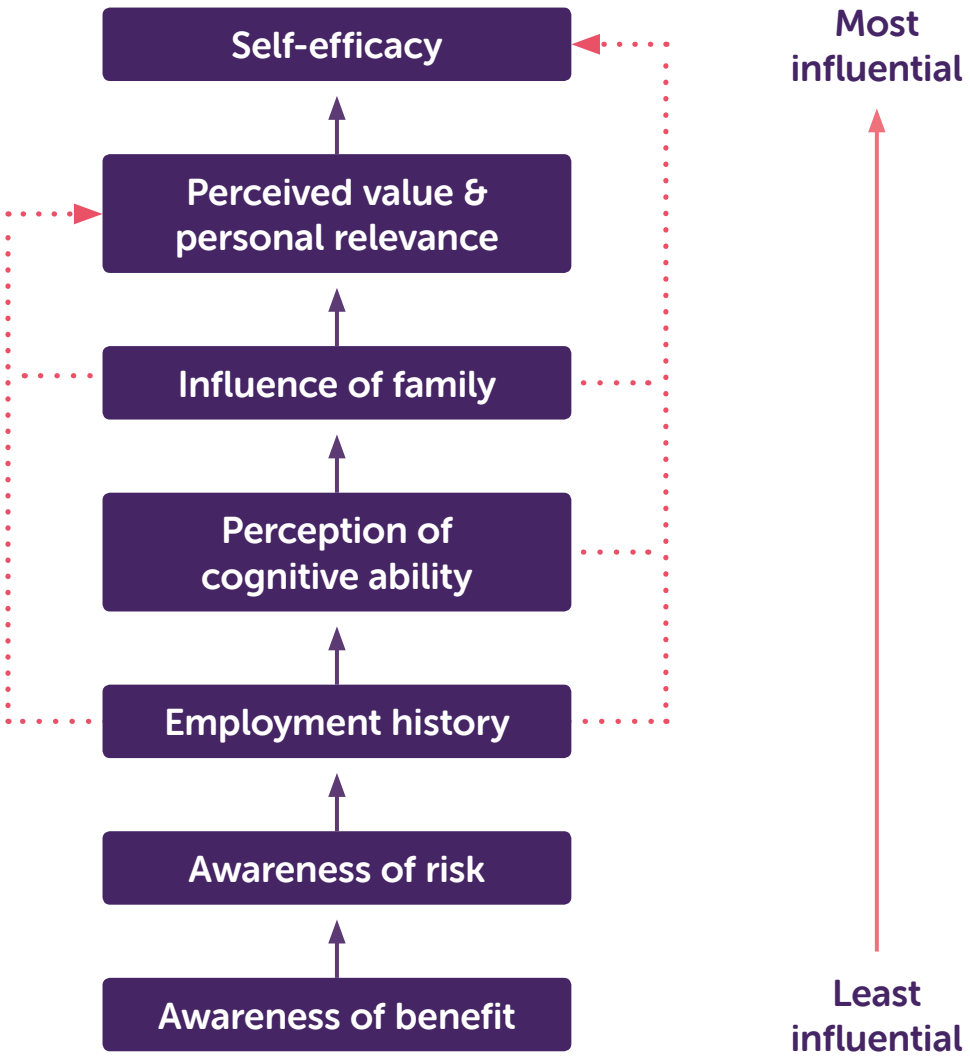
Key findings

Factors that influence internet usage in later life

Our research highlights the multiple and complex barriers that individuals in later life face in getting online and the deeply individual and personal nature of these challenges. Whilst some widespread preconceived barriers such as the affordability of equipment did not arise as significant issues, other issues such as confidence and attitudes towards the internet came up repeatedly.

There was also a hierarchy, with less significant factors being overcome by barriers of greater significance and impact.

Figure 1: Factors influencing internet usage in later life



Awareness of benefits

"[People] have said, 'oh, look at this,' when they've been on Facebook. 'Oh, look at this, you can do whatever.' Or, 'look at this person doing whatever,' and I'm just a bit like, 'really?"

Understanding the benefits of being online does little to change attitudes or behaviour – non-users with a detailed understanding of the benefits might still choose not to engage.

Talking to your grandchild on Skype, listening to your favourite music on Spotify and ordering your weekly food shop were not consistently viewed by people we spoke to as 'benefits' per se, they were simply another way of doing things. Offline alternatives were often also available, and in some cases preferable.

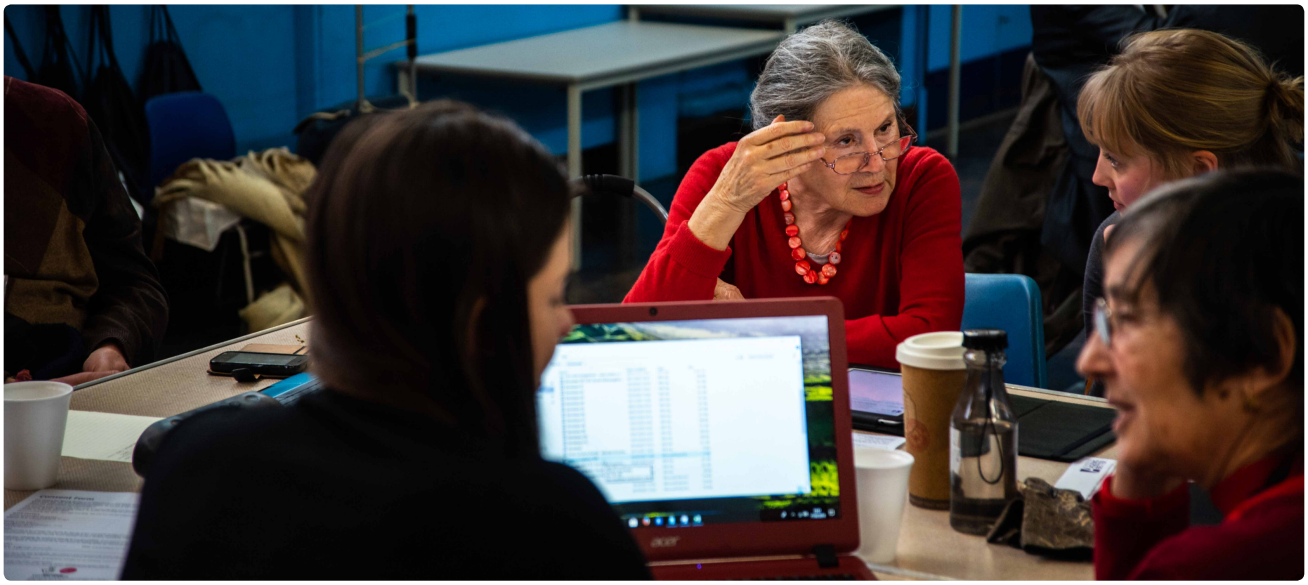
"I think it's better if you just go to the shop... you could spend more [online]... I've got the radio on the telly now. And I've got my little diddy [stereo] system. So no, I don't need it for that. And if there's a film I want to watch, if I've got it on DVD, I'll just put it in the machine and watch it."

Lapsed user, female, 55-65, C2

Awareness of risks

"I haven't [done any financial transactions online], because at the moment I don't feel that secure, you know, with all the fraud and, you know, the negative things you hear all the time."

Most people were concerned about the risks of being online – typically the security of personal and financial information. However, views were often ill-informed and derived from something people had heard about or read in a newspaper. The boundaries between benefit, risk and different activities became so blurred that for some, it wasn't always clear where their fears lay.



"You know a lot of phones have been pinched and broken into and it's got all of everybody's details on. And on the Facebook you put all your personal details on there and I just don't need to know about other people's things. You know, the security people can get into if you put your bank – or if you bank online or whatever – I don't know if you do put your bank details in, but if you do, I don't know how – if somebody else can get into it and get your details and you know."

Lapsed user, female, 55-64, C2

However, awareness of risks was not in itself a key barrier to engagement, rather 'another reason not to get online', and will most likely just limit users' activity online. This reflects national data where just 8% of non-users cited it as the most important reason for their non-use (Ofcom 2018). Many of the new users we spoke to were willing to try out most online activities, but for financial transactions they typically chose offline alternatives, such as going to the shop or local bank branch or use trusted 'skilled' proxies. Experiencing a security breach or warning could be enough to lead some to stopping internet use altogether.

Employment status

"I've never had to use it for work, in any form whatsoever. I certainly didn't use it when I was decorating or driving a coach. So most of my mates, they had jobs where they had to use computers, so they actually got into it. But I didn't, so I haven't."

People's employment history shaped their attitude to and perception of digital and their ability to engage. Those with limited exposure to computers and the internet during their working lives were often far less confident with them, though sometimes this was down to lack of interest than opportunity.

"[Computers] were just coming in, and we had the people who were fanatic in the schools... but I didn't want to go on it."

New learner, female, 75+, B

While it is not always the case that workers need digital skills as part of their jobs, for those claiming job-seeking benefits such as Jobseekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and Universal Credit, it has become unavoidable. Since 2012, claimants have been required to complete job searches and applications online – and face sanctions if they do not comply (National Audit Office 2016). This compulsion to use online services is a significant driver of engagement – 42% of Online Centres' learners aged 55-64 learn about Online Centres from a Jobcentre. Several participants in our research had been directly referred.

"I wasn't really that good with computers so [the Jobcentre] said, why don't you go to [an Online Centre] and see if they can help you."

New learner, JSA claimant, female, 55-64, C2

Perception of cognitive ability

"I think it makes us seem stupid. This is what you're frightened of. With people. And you're not, but it's a different world. It's much quicker than we're used to."

People's self-perception and expectation of their own ability is a greater factor in their decision to get online than their actual cognitive ability. Cultural assumptions and the 'stereotype threat' that 'older people can't learn to use computers' may become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Pennington et al 2016). For some in our study, this had significant, damaging effects on their self-efficacy and their willingness to learn to use the internet. However, for others, this barrier was not insurmountable.

Maybe it appears harder, like to be able to memorise, or maybe it's the idea that as you get older you shouldn't really bother so much, that's somewhere in the brain somewhere, and as I just keep telling myself, 'It's not true, never mind how old I am, my mind is still working."

New learner, female, 65-74, C1

Where cognitive decline (both actual and perceived) posed most challenge for individuals was when they had started learning to use the internet. Many people spoke of having to grapple with the realities of changing cognitive function, such as the difficulty in retaining new and complex information – although this was true for different people, at different ages and to different extents.

Influence of family

"I wanted to know more about the internet, computer system, because I depend on my kids a lot and sometimes they don't have the time to advise me or to show me what to do."

Families play a significant but contradictory role in the digital engagement of people in later life – being both an enabling and disabling factor simultaneously.

Access

Family members are important in enabling access to digital technology – often responsible for purchasing and setting up the technology for their loved one, regardless of whether it was wanted.

"I had no choice... [My son] rang us up and says, 'it's time you had a laptop'. I said, 'I don't want one'. He said, 'yes, you do'. I said, 'no, I don't'. He said, 'you can do your banking on it, your shopping on it'. I says, 'I don't want to do banking on it. I don't really want to do shopping on it'. So he bought us one at Christmas."

Non-user, male, 55-64, C2

For some people in later life this provided an impetus to learn, but others found it intimidating and it did not translate into learning or engagement.

Teaching and troubleshooting

Families' role in supporting the use of technology was mixed. Some people reported receiving little support from their family, while for others the support they received was not particularly helpful – and in some cases damaging their to self-efficacy and confidence.

Key ingredients for successfully supporting older people to learn to use digital include the avoidance of jargon and the ability to repeat to consolidate learning (Olphert and Damodaran 2013). However, in our study these ingredients were not usually provided by family members. The nature of the relationship and the sheer size of the knowledge gap made the process mutually frustrating and discouraging.

"I haven't really [asked family for help] because they haven't got the patience with me... they think it's all easy, they do it too quick, you know what I mean, they show you too quick and then they expect you to get it the first time they tell you."

New learner, female, 55-64, D

However, for those who are already using the internet, family can provide an essential 'troubleshooting' function. They are the first point of call for older users who need help with the internet: 58% of retirees ask family for help, compared to only 23% who would seek help from sources such as libraries and training courses (Dutton et al 2013).

Proxy use

National data suggests over two in five (44%) non-users access the internet through a proxy (Ofcom 2018). However, proxy use was almost universal amongst participants in our research.

Even when an individual has access to a proxy, it has little bearing on whether they are motivated to learn.

"I bought her twins a post office set each, and then she does it for me on her computer... I give her the money for that and she must have done it on her one. I'm quite happy with [my family] doing it."

Limited user, female, 75+, C2

Instead, it is the unavailability of proxy support that may drive older people online. Of Online Centres' learners aged 65 and over, 28% give as their reason for learning that 'someone used to do online tasks on my behalf but now I have to do them for myself'.

Broadly speaking, proxy use through family may remove the need for older people to go online whilst enabling the individual to access the benefits of the digital world. However, it is important to recognise that the loss of a proxy can cause significant difficulties. Children moving away or the death of a friend or life partner may suddenly prevent older people from taking advantage of the internet and also means the loss of a source of other forms of support and social contact, making the need to go online all the more pressing.

"I became dependent on him [my husband] when I needed anything done on the computer... [he] has recently been ill for almost a year that too has made me realised how important it is that I am independent of him."

New learner, female, 65-74, B

Perceived value and personal relevance

"I had no interest in it to be honest. Then I started to think about it. There's lots of information that I could get off the computer... I like history and I like geography and there's lots of things on the computer for instance. But there's lots of things. I like poetry."

In the major UK surveys of digital behaviour, the most commonly cited reasons for internet non-use are related to a sense that the internet is not valuable, interesting or relevant to the individual. Like absolute use and breadth of use, this lack of perceived value correlates with age; however, it does not correlate with social grade and education level (Ofcom 2017, Helsper 2013).

This sense of value and personal relevance is essential if an individual is to get online. It also needs to be fully understood in order to develop appropriate and effective methods of engagement and outreach by digital inclusion services.

Perceptions of 'the internet'

Large national surveys focus on reasons for 'not being online' or 'using the internet' – presenting the internet as a single category rather than a range of activities. All this tells us is that older non-users may not be interested in interacting with 'the internet' as an abstract concept, which can be filled with value-statements, assumptions and misunderstandings.

However, data from Good Things Foundation's Online Centre Learner Survey shows that over 55s are more likely than under 55s to be interested and see a value in learning how to do specific activity, such as finding health information or communicating with family and friends.

Interest in the internet and age

A lack of exposure and need for digital technologies throughout the life course may be one reason for the lack of relevance perceived by the majority of older non-users. As one participant stated, 'We've lived all these years and we're not bothered now.'

For those with good social resources – and access to the internet via family proxies – not being online personally and having no interest in it did not present any particular challenges.

"If you haven't got an interest whatsoever, how is somebody going to persuade you to do it? If they can persuade you to do it, then you've got a little bit of interest. And I haven't."

Non-user, male, 65-74, C2

Some people also stated a preference for offline alternatives, such as the face-to-face social interaction of going to the shops and supporting local employers and employees (Knowles and Hanson 2018).

In some cases, the lack of exposure even resulted in older non-users seeing themselves as fundamentally different from those who use the internet. Rather than attitudes being 'I choose not to do that', the attitudes of some were 'I choose not to be like that'.

"That's where I'm different from everybody else. People would rather read things or do whatever on the computer; whereas I'd rather have it in my hand to go back to if I need to... I don't think I'd get the use out of it that other people do."

Non-user, female, 55-65, C2

Being able to identify where a lack of interest is or is not problematic, and respond accordingly, is a critical problem for policymakers and practitioners within digital and wider social inclusion activity.

"Fundamental change in beliefs and intentions about digital technologies and its use can be achieved in a very short time... Misperceptions are quickly corrected through experiential learning.

(Damodaran & Burroughs 2017)

Self-efficacy

"Can I do it? Can I not do it?'... I'd always wanted to use [a computer]. But too frightened, too scared. Because I didn't know how to. Because as you get older you do lose your confidence. You get used to staying in your own little niche."

A stated 'lack of interest', however, can mask more fundamental issues around self-efficacy and perceived ability and capacity to engage with the internet.

The most significant barrier that non-users face in getting online was a belief that they are not capable of doing so. Many described a real fear of 'the internet' and a lack of confidence in being able to navigate it. A lack of self-efficacy can be caused by a range of different factors:

- Negative experiences of learning throughout the life course, both in relation to digital and non-digital activities
- Stereotype threat and the belief that you are 'too old' to get online, which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy
- Perception of the internet as a place which is not for older people

"You left school, went to work for a couple of years, you finished work and you had your family and that was it. That was your life... You have children and you put your children first and then you do get in the same pattern and you stay where you are and then you get a bit scared."

New learner, female, 55-64, D

Self-efficacy was also a significant barrier in terms of sustained learning and continued use of the internet. Without it, the smallest setback – such as forgetting a password or navigating a virus warning – can be taken as evidence that they will never be able to learn to use the internet. Whereas for those who do have high self-efficacy, almost any obstacle to learning a new skill becomes negotiable.

A new framework for digital inclusion in later life

The range of influences on older people's digital behaviour is broad, and the exact combination of personal circumstances is unique to each individual. The reasons that might be given for remaining offline, or limiting internet use, may also not be what they seem.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. To motivate and support older people to use digital we need to recognise this diversity. This research suggests the need for a new approach for digital inclusion in later life that focuses on three essential personal factors: **perceived value**, **self-efficacy**, and **need**.

- **Perceived value:** people need to perceive the internet and things that can be done online as something that is relevant and valuable to them as individuals. For some, this may be connected to specific outcomes and types of usage; others will have a general interest in the possibilities of the internet, even if these are poorly understood. Perceived value is also connected to the other resources people can draw on – if you have access to other sources of support you may place less value in being online.
- **Self-efficacy:** people must also have a positive view of their own ability if they are to learn how to use the internet. This may be affected by their assumptions about their age, other personal characteristics or about digital technology itself; by personality traits; or by the influence of previous experiences in learning, work and home life. Self-efficacy can affect the decision to go online, stay online and around which activities to undertake online.
- **Need:** whilst not essential for everyone, a need for the internet can be a significant driver for some people's decision to go online. We define need as a need for personal use (i.e. not possible through a proxy or where a proxy is not available) which can significantly improve the quality of life of someone with poor wellbeing and that such an improvement cannot easily be obtained via offline alternatives.

Digital inclusion measures and strategies tend to collate these barriers under the heading 'motivation'. However, perceived value and self-efficacy exist independently, and both are needed for someone to be motivated. And need – while a crucial consideration for digital inclusion strategy – does not by itself necessarily create motivation: an individual may meet any definition of need, but still not perceive the internet as valuable or something that they can hope to learn to use.

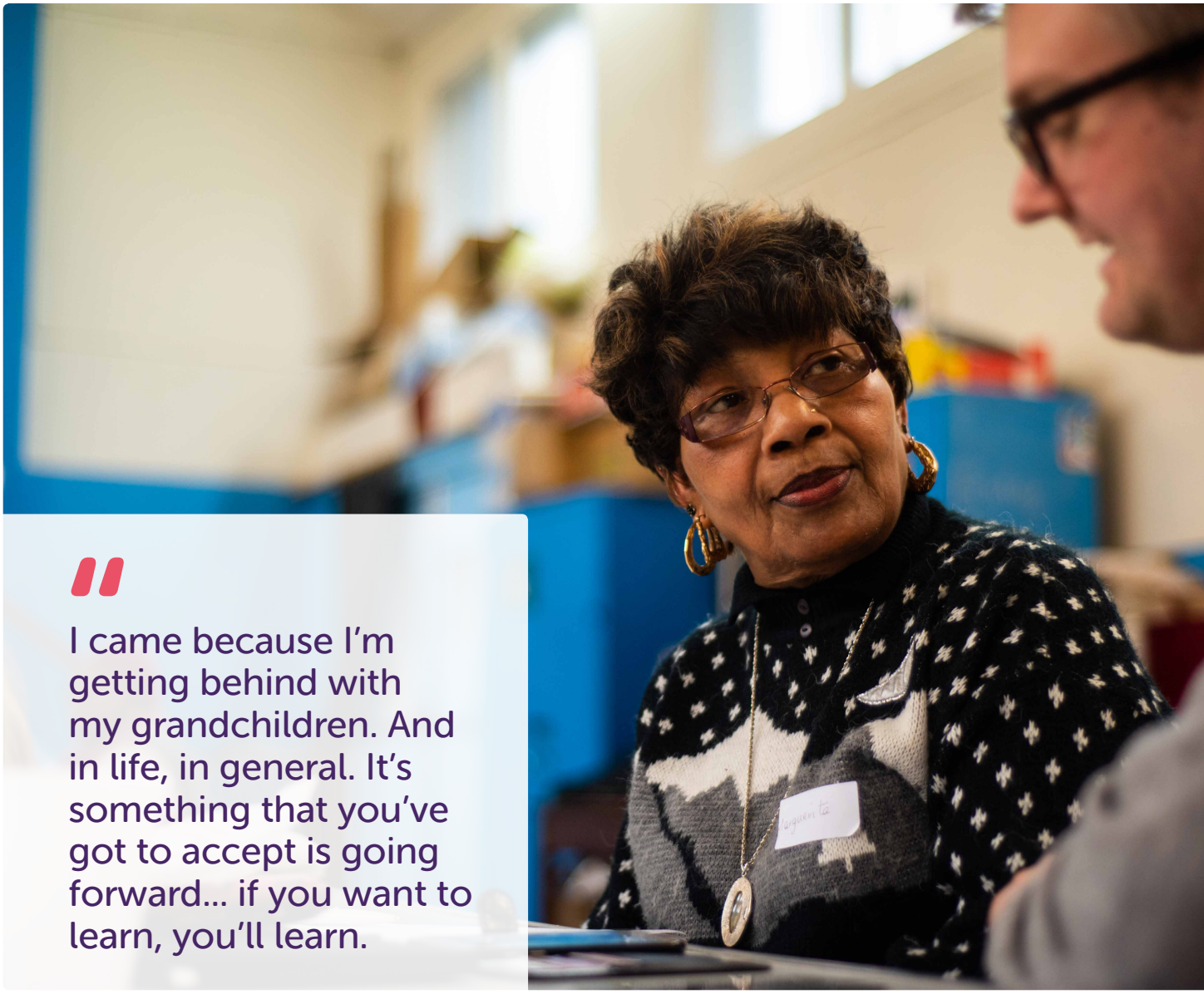
Understanding digital engagement in later life

Policymakers and practitioners needs to recognise the importance of each of perceived value, self-efficacy and need in deciding where and how to direct their energy: there is no 'one size fits all' approach.

For practical purposes, our research has suggested that it would be beneficial to think about four different categories or 'states' that individuals can transition between: **engaged**, **uninterested**, **disheartened**, and **transitional**. A full discussion of these can be found in the full report.

Engaged

Engaged older people have good **self-efficacy** and **perceive the value of** digital technology: they are already interested in digital technology at some level and believe they are capable of learning what they need to know. They may or may **not have an urgent need** to learn digital skills, but the presence of such a need may influence what and how they want to learn.



> "I came because I'm getting behind with my grandchildren. And in life, in general. It's something that you've got to accept is going forward... if you want to learn, you'll learn.

Disheartened

People who are disheartened **perceive some value** in the internet, and may have **some need** as well, but their **low self-efficacy** creates a major barrier to their getting online.

> I couldn't take everything in... I mean, I don't know whether I would be better off learning from a book or another method. It's probably worked for a lot of people... I just find it all very, very daunting.

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Uninterested

Those who are uninterested **perceive little or no value** in the internet, at least in terms of personal use, but they also have **no real need** for it. They reject the internet from a position of relative strength and are not seriously disadvantaged by their non-use. However, mechanisms should exist to identify and support them if a change of personal circumstances makes them **transitional** (below).

> "I've never, throughout my working life, never had to use a computer. Never. So I've got no interest in it... My son rang us up and says, 'it's time you had a laptop'. I said, 'I don't want one'... He said, 'you've got to move in with the times'. I said, 'why? Is all the shops going to shut? Is all the banks going to close?'

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Transitional

The defining characteristic of the transitional stage is a **significant (and often sudden) increase in need** for digital technology where changing circumstances, such as a loss of a job, deterioration in health or loss of a loved one, have turned the internet from an optional extra to a vital lifeline. They may also trigger a lapse in use.

Despite having a high need for the internet, those in a transitional state may **perceive little or no value** in the internet, remaining unaware or unwilling to accept that they have reached a point where their belief that 'I'm better off without it' is no longer true; or they may want to learn, but struggle with **low self-efficacy**.

People in a transitional stage often need close and careful support, whether or not they are current users.

> "I could not go back doing what I was doing. Because I know how my knees are... I had a really bad fall in November... I have got such a lot out of my learning the computer as far as I've gone now. It's completely changed my life. Because I know these things like paying my bills. If I can't get out, I can pay it...

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New approaches to engagement and delivery

Whilst significant progress has been made in supporting people in later life to use the internet, many remain offline. Policymakers, funders and digital inclusion practitioners will need to challenge their own assumptions and develop new approaches to reach and effectively support this varied group.

A right to be offline

In responding to the challenge of 'digital exclusion', policymakers and practitioners need to understand where a person's non-use is driven by material or psychological barriers and where it is an informed and reasonable choice. Older people need to be able to retain the right to be uninterested and reject the internet in part or in whole.

Rather than treating non-use as a problem, we should focus on ensuring that people are making an informed choice not to go online, and providing support as and when their need to use the internet for themselves increases.

Reaching older non-users

We need new approaches to engaging older people with digital learning – strategies that reflect the very different starting points that people are at and the different drivers and barriers to engagement that they are experiencing.

Marketing and messaging

Traditional marketing, such as posters and local papers remain effective for reaching those who are engaged. Trusted intermediaries such as libraries are also effective routes for engagement.

More tailored messaging that addresses self-efficacy, such as peer-to-peer communication, could help those who are more disheartened – who are interested but feel unable to learn to use digital.

To develop the right messages and respond to the changing attitudes towards and perceptions of the digital world, marketing materials need to be designed with the input of the frontline delivery organisations who will use them, and the older people they are aimed at.

Embedding digital support

People who are more acutely disheartened, or who have entered a transitional stage, could benefit from digital support that is embedded within other support and community services.

As opposed to digital inclusion operating as a standalone intervention, digital support should be embedded within the delivery model of a range of local community and public services wherever feasible and appropriate.

Providers of digital inclusion support need to work in partnership with other local public and community services, as opposed to providing their services as a standalone provision.

Particularly for those in a transitional state, it is essential that any approach to introducing digital support is sensitive. It may not be immediately appropriate or effective to teach someone to use digital services independently when undergoing a significant and potentially traumatic transition such as losing a job or a deterioration in health. It may be more appropriate to simply sustain or enable access on their behalf – in other words local support services may act as intermediate 'proxies'.

However, with the right kind of support, transitions can trigger engagement where none previously existed, with positive results.

"I just got a letter [from the Jobcentre] saying that I needed to go to this meeting which I did... They just had this whiteboard up, and it said 'computer [classes]... so I asked them about it and they said come. So I plucked courage up, come across and I'm enjoying every minute of it."

New learner, ESA claimant, female, 55-65, D

Community signposting

Community signposting (a form of social prescription where referrals come in through a range of sources to a single community worker or volunteer) is a potentially powerful engagement model for digital inclusion, as it draws on the influence of trusted intermediaries interacting with older people personally as well as professionally.

The NHS Widening Digital Participation programme found that prescriptions to standalone digital learning opportunities do not tend to be followed. Higher engagement, and an increased sense of perceived value, can be achieved by referring to a 'wellbeing champion' rather than a 'digital champion' – where digital and non-digital support are combined into one package of support. For example, if a walking club had been prescribed, the wellbeing champion would provide support for that person to use the internet to find out about local walking clubs.

Through embedding digital support in other local services and focusing on how digital can enable you to do the thing you need or want to do – be that finding a walking club, completing an online form to register your power of attorney or searching for a savings account with the best interest rate – you can create the relevance and personal value that is essential to getting online.

However, whilst focused on the completion of a specific task initially, the support should be adequately funded and structured so that it can capitalise on the engagement generated to expand knowledge and skills beyond the initial tasks of focus.

Older jobseekers

Whilst the mandatory requirement to look and apply for jobs online continues to drive older jobseekers to access digital support, too often they are under pressure to complete a limited range of essential job seeking activities, as opposed to developing broad skills which could be useful in the workplace.

To make the most of such referral routes, it is essential that sufficient funding is provided to ensure support can be provided to develop the skills to carry out tasks that are beyond the mandatory jobseeking tasks.

Effective delivery of embedded digital support requires strong partnership working – between policymakers, local organisations, such as health services and JobCentres, and digital inclusion practitioners. A joint ambition and collaborative approach to delivery is essential.

Government should:

- **Use Local Digital Skills Partnerships as testbeds** – the newly established Local Digital Skills Partnerships should be used as testbeds for developing and trialling innovative models of engagement and outreach through partnership working and embedding digital support (delivered by public, private and third sector organisations) in local services.

Funders should:

- **Fund digital support as a component of social inclusion activities** – provide funding for local community services to deliver digital support as part of their service offer. Many organisations already do so informally but are not funded or supported to this sustainably.

Practitioners should:

- **Co-design marketing materials** – marketing materials should be co-designed with the target audience to ensure that the offer is attractive and relevant.

- **Explore opportunities for internal referrals and embedded digital support** – practitioners who deliver services beyond digital inclusion support (such as financial advice, health and wellbeing support) should review opportunities for providing this support as an embedded part of other services they provide.

- **Explore partnerships opportunities** – digital inclusion practitioners from private, public and third sector organisations should seek opportunities to deliver digital inclusion support in partnership with other local public and community services, as opposed to providing their services as a standalone provision in order to maximise their reach and avoid duplication within local provision.

Delivering support to older learners

There is currently no overarching digital inclusion programme for people in later life in the UK, with various different provisions offered at both national and local levels.

A significant proportion of this provision is time-limited, in the form of short courses or taster sessions. However, our research suggests that such provision does not meet the needs of people in later life, and in some cases can do more harm than good.

Our research identified eight key good-practice principles for delivering support to people in later life:

1. **Flexibility and relevance:** Structured courses focused on 'developing skills' are unlikely to be effective in improving self-efficacy or in generating and sustaining interest. Support should concentrate on helping people to do the things they need and want to do online.

2. **The right pace:** Older learners will have differing abilities to pick up information and will progress their learning at different paces. It is important that support is responsive to the needs of the individual learner.

3. **Repetition and reflection:** Creating space for repetition is essential in allowing people to consolidate learnings and build confidence in completing tasks. The opportunity to recognise and reflect on successes achieved should be central to all learning encounters.

4. **The right language:** Overuse of technical terms can be confusing and counterproductive. Simple language should be used which focuses on the task being completed, rather than the technology they are using to do it.

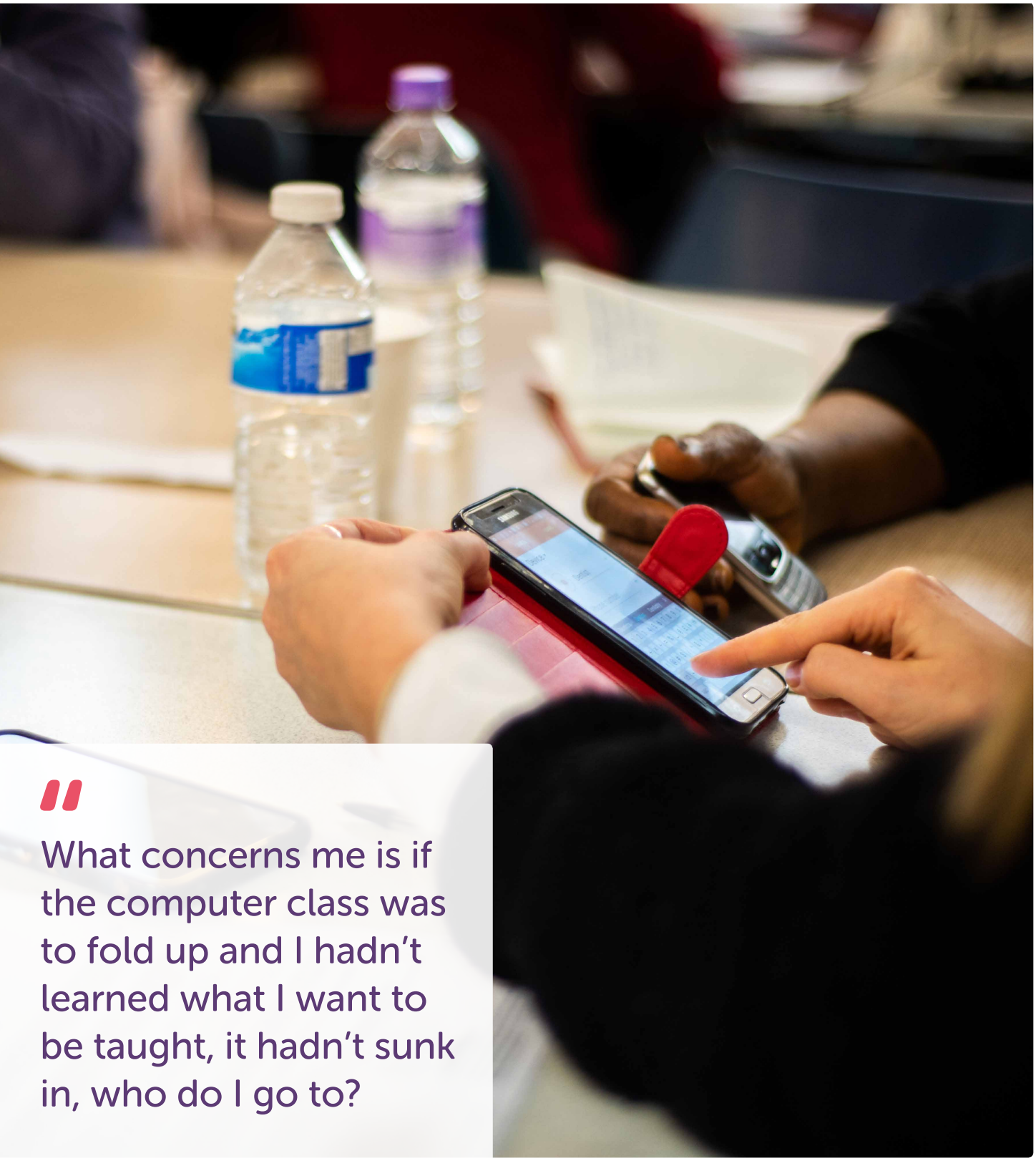
5. **One-to-one support:** A strong tutor-pupil relationship is key to building confidence, which is as important as developing specific skills and knowledge for older learners.

6. **Time to build relationships:** Tutors who devote time to building communication and trust will be better able to maintain learners' interest in digital and increase their self-efficacy.

7. **Ongoing support:** Support needs to be ongoing and structured in an open-ended way, allowing learners to return with questions and problems.

8. **Co-design:** It is essential to involve users in the shaping and design of all services, new and existing, to ensure their relevance and effectiveness. A wide range of current service users, along with people who aren't currently engaged, should be involved.

Effective digital inclusion practice requires intensive, person-centred support, and an open-ended commitment. Rigid and time-limited provision is a false economy. Whatever the positive effects of digital inclusion pilots, 'tasters' and short courses, these will fade quickly when learning opportunities end (Damodaran and Sandhu 2016). This approach may be worse than doing nothing at all. Perceived value and self-efficacy are precious commodities, difficult to create and easy to damage. The wrong kind of provision can cause complete digital disengagement.



> What concerns me is if the computer class was to fold up and I hadn't learned what I want to be taught, it hadn't sunk in, who do I go to?

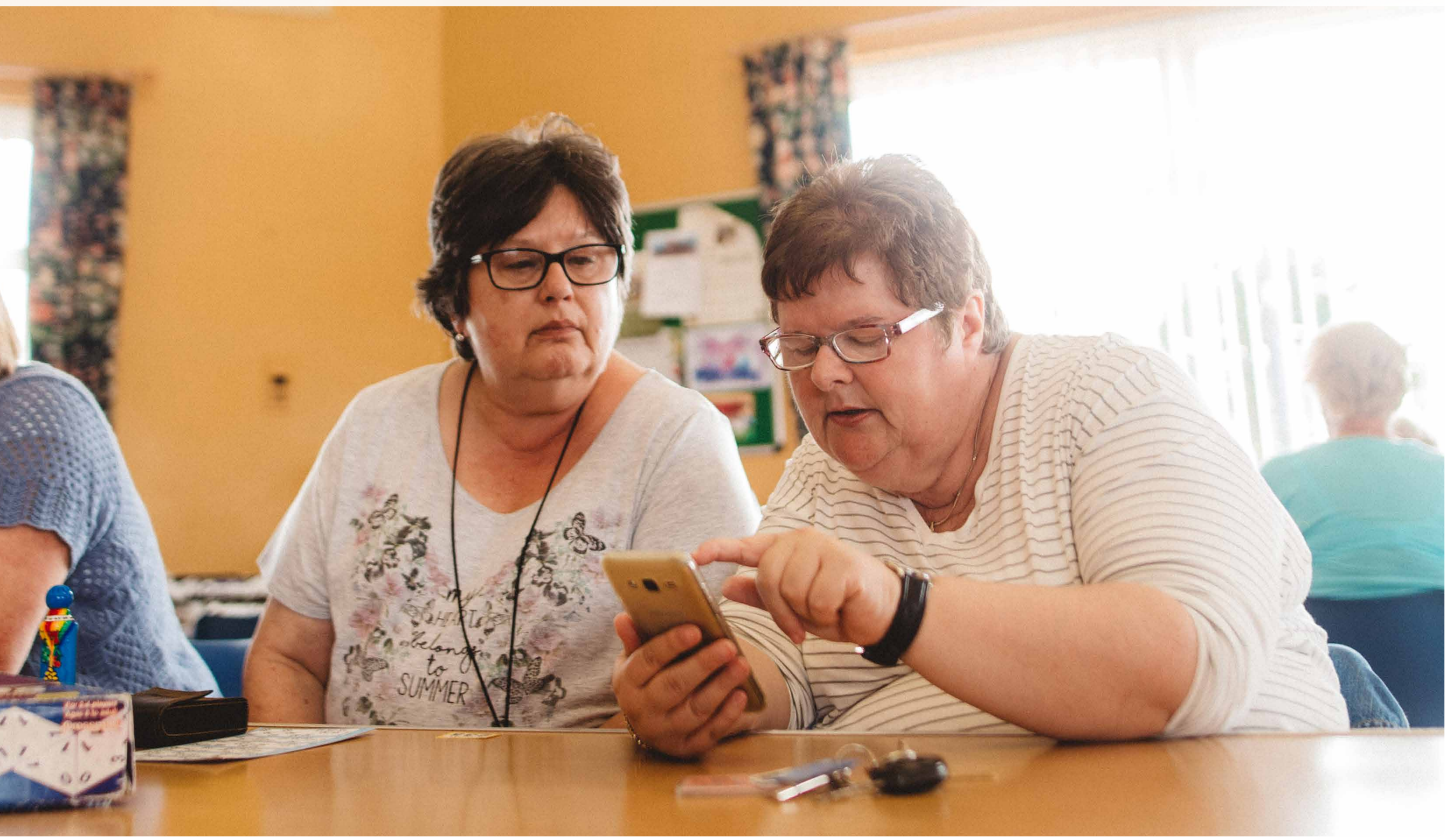
Peer support

Practitioners should also explore innovative new approaches to delivering support. Peer support is a promising, yet under-explored and under-utilised model.

Opportunities for peer support should be explored as core component of any delivery model. Trusted peers based within existing communities are more likely to be able to provide support that is sustainable and self-supporting, are likely to be known and trusted, and seeing 'people like me' succeed with digital is a valuable source of self-efficacy.

To be effective and sustainable, peer support needs to be adequately funded to enable training and ongoing co-ordination to be sustainable.

> We helped them form a Community Group with a committee and a bank account. We suggested they apply for funding and they were successful... we supported them through the purchase stage to get a reliable setup. We support them on one day with a volunteer. They also have their own digital champions who support the group on the other days. Most of our support now tends to be around problems with equipment with many people purchasing laptops and tablets of their own.
>
> Online Centre manager, East of England



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Government should:

- **Create coherency across private, public and third sector provision** – Government should play a lead role in creating greater coherency across digital inclusion support provided by businesses, community organisations and public services. The myriad of support available could be **better structured to create local, sustainable systems of digital inclusion support**. Opportunities for developing and trialling new models could be trialled through Local Digital Skills Partnerships.

Funders should:

- **Trial and invest in higher cost, long-term, personalised support** – rigid, time-limited provision is a false economy in engaging and supporting older users, especially the more disheartened and transitional. Funding should be structured to allow for one-to-one, long-term support. This should be trialled in local areas (such as the new Local Digital Skills Partnerships) to assess cost-effectiveness.

- **Trial and invest in new models such as peer-to-peer support** – specific funding should be allocated for the trialling and evaluation of promising models such as peer-to-peer digital inclusion.

Digital inclusion providers should:

- **Co-design services** – services should be co-designed with users to ensure the content and structure effectively meets the needs of end users. This approach should be embedded as business as usual – both in designing new services and in reviewing and developing existing ones.

- **Take a flexible, person-centred approach to support** – a flexible, person-centred approach is essential in building confidence and maintaining interested. Spending time on understanding an individual's personal circumstances, interests and needs is vital.

Implications for policy

Our research has highlighted the need for digital inclusion policy and practice to take a new approach to understanding and addressing the challenges around supporting more people in later life to be online. There are three key issues to address:

We need to identify where genuine need for the internet exists

When 'digital exclusion' is discussed in policy and practice it is often talked about as 'people who do not use the internet'. However, our research shows that the relationship between personal use of the internet and digital exclusion is far more complex.

Whilst many people we spoke to were not active online themselves, they still had access to the benefits and services available online, but via proxies (typically families and friends) who would complete online activities on their behalf.

Others were still able to access offline alternatives to many online services, and indeed, preferred to do so. Far from being 'excluded', these people had found adequate offline means of navigating an increasingly digital world.

However, there were those who could not access alternative routes to services and had a far greater need to use the internet. These people, typically of poorer health and with fewer social connections, had limited or no access to offline alternatives. Your status in terms of health, access to proxies and access to local services all determine your digital needs.

'Digitally excluded' people have no means to access the benefits of the digital world – and this is deeply connected to their social exclusion. These people often have the greatest need to access digital services, but they are the least able to do so.

We need to shift focus away from 'basic digital skills' and towards enabling people to do the things they and want to do online

We need to change the conversation to recognise that the internet is the means, not the end. It is an enabler, allowing access to a growing range of information and services, better deals and cheaper goods. Internet access can support improved wellbeing, financial security and health.

Digital has a role to play in achieving these outcomes, but in different ways and to different degrees for different people. Some will have a greater need for the internet in achieving these

outcomes. Some will see the value of a digitally-mediated service and will feel confident and assured in using digital to achieve these ends, others will not.

Our research suggests that **skills and access are becoming less reliable indicators of meaningful digital engagement, especially amongst older people**. Despite having access to devices, many older people remain non or limited users, and specific skills – although important – are not enough. Without the motivation to use and maintain them they will be lost.

In focusing on whether people are 'internet users' or not, and whether these individuals have basic digital skills, we will not be able to tackle the challenge of digital inclusion at scale. For many, basic digital skills are neither the problem nor the solution. **A strategy based solely on increasing basic digital skills will fail to address issues around self-efficacy and perceived value of the internet, which are the more fundamental barriers to digital engagement**.

We need to better understand the barriers to getting online in later life

Most approaches to engaging people in later life with the internet focus on 'generating interest' and selling the benefits of the online world. However, this approach fails to recognise that the 'benefits' of digital are largely personal and subjective. **The 'things that you can do online' are different from the 'benefits'**.

Simply doing things 'online', such as speaking to a grandchild or renewing home insurance, is not the benefit itself. What matters is whether being online enables you to do something conveniently, easily or cheaply versus the offline alternatives and the value you place on them.

Lack of interest in going online may also be an uncomplicated fact for those with good social resources and high wellbeing.

However, for others it may be a smokescreen, obscuring more fundamental underlying barriers to engagement and participation, such as low self-efficacy and misconceptions about the internet.

We need to develop new strategies which go beyond 'generating interest' and focus on understanding the more fundamental drivers and enablers of digital inclusion: **perceived value, self-efficacy and need**.

Government should:

- **Widen digital inclusion policy to look beyond 'basic digital skills'** – Government policy on digital inclusion must take a wider focus beyond 'basic digital skills' – recognising that for many these are neither the problem nor the solution. A strategy based solely on increasing basic digital skills will fail to address issues around self-efficacy and perceived value of the internet, which are the more fundamental barriers to digital engagement. Digital exclusion is a social issue, not a digital one. The interrelatedness of social inclusion and digital inclusion should be explicitly recognised in wider government strategies and in framing who the target groups for interventions are.

- **Recognise that some people will not get online** – Government needs to recognise that for some, getting online is neither urgent nor a priority. We need to ensure no one is penalised for being offline. Instead of attempting to convince or force reluctant users online, attention needs to be paid to creating effective methods of outreach and ensuring that when the need for digital services do arise, people are proactively supported to get online.

Funders should:

- **Measure success by attainment of non-digital outcomes** – success should not be measured on numbers attaining basic digital skills. Instead measures should focus on non-digital outcomes such as improved access to health information or increased wellbeing.

Digital inclusion providers should:

- **Develop new approaches to engagement and delivery** – digital inclusion activities should shift the focus away from 'generating interest' and developing more nuanced strategies that recognise people's personal circumstances, confidence in their ability to use the internet and individual perception of the internet and its value.

Service providers should:

- **Consider how to support service users to engage with online services** – private, public and third sector providers of digital services need to consider their responsibility to service users who are offline and how best to support non-users to engage with their online services.

- **Ensure there are alternative routes for people to access services** – even with a strong support offer, not everyone will be able to independently access services online. It is essential that service providers maintain and develop multiple means of accessing their services.

Conclusion

Too many people in later life are missing out on the benefits of being online.

For some people, with good social resources and access to alternatives, the choice not to be online is rational and uncomplicated. However, for some, such as those facing unemployment, ill health, loneliness and isolation, being online could make profound positive changes to their lives. For others, being online can bring huge benefits not necessarily because they desperately need it, but because it brings them pleasure and easier access to information and resources.

We need a new approach – one which recognises the wide range of personal circumstances and attitudes amongst the older offline population.

Policymakers, funders and practitioners must develop a more nuanced understanding of older people's need for digital technology and their motivation to use it, in order to provide effective solutions for accessing and supporting those in greatest need.

We need to develop new ways of reaching out to and engaging people, based on the essential ingredients of perceived value, self-efficacy and need. New models of delivery, such as embedded digital support and community-based peer support need to be trialled. Increased funding for digital inclusion activity will be essential, so practitioners can provide the intensive, long-term, one-to-one support needed to effectively support people in later life to get, and stay, online.

It is easy to think that with the increasing digitisation of society everyone will eventually be online, and so the digital divide will simply fade away. In fact, the opposite is true. As our services and interactions become ever more digitised, the digital divide between the most and least advantaged in society will grow and may become amplified across the life course. We need to take action now to prevent this gap between the digital haves and have-nots from becoming entrenched.

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