

SUPPORTING DIGITAL
LITERACY AMONG
OLDER PEOPLE

Introduction

A generation of older people is being left behind as an increasingly online Ireland fails to support and empower older people to properly participate in our society as digital citizens.

Half of Irish people aged between 65 and 74 have never used the internet. This is far worse than the figures of 37 per cent among the EU15 and 16 per cent in Britain.¹ The National Digital Strategy describes internet use among those aged over 75 as negligible.²

The definition of 'literacy' today includes being able to use simple, everyday, technology to communicate and handle information.³ Literacy issues around technology exclude a large group of people in society from educational, financial and commercial opportunities.

This Age Action briefing paper highlights the urgent need to invest in supporting and enhancing digital literacy for older people.

The context

Ireland has an international brand as a tech leader, home to more than 900 software companies including some of the world's biggest brands.⁴ Despite this image, digital literacy among older people lags far behind our nearest neighbour and comparable EU states.

Table 1 Internet use among people aged between 65 and 74 (2017)

Percentage of people aged 65-74 who:	<i>Ireland</i>	Britain	Denmark	Finland	Estonia	EU28
Used the internet within last 12 months	46	81	89	76	55	54
Never used the internet	50	16	42	9	21	39

Source: Eurostat

Combining best available figures from the above Eurostat data, Census 2016 statistics and the National Digital Strategy's 2013 estimate that only 3 per cent of people aged 75 and over use the internet, we estimate that almost 440,000 older people in Ireland have never been online. This represents almost 70 per cent of the total population over 65.⁵

¹Eurostat 2017. <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/digital-economy-and-society/data/database>

²National Digital Strategy 2013. <https://www.dcae.gov.ie/en-ie/communications/publications/Documents/63/National%20Digital%20Strategy%20July%202013%20compressed.pdf>

³NALA. See www.nala.ie/literacy

⁴<https://www.idaireland.com/doing-business-here/industry-sectors/software>

⁵Eurostat and CSO figures.

But it is not enough to simply be able to access the internet; digital exclusion also refers to those who can get online but do so less often or are able to use fewer services.

Seventy per cent of Irish internet users use it every day. Among those who do use the internet and are aged 60-74, the figure falls dramatically to 31 per cent.⁶

Table 2 Internet skill levels among people aged between 65 and 74 (2017)

Percentage of people aged 65-74 who:	<i>Ireland</i>	Britain	Denmark	Finland	Estonia	EU28
Have basic or above basic overall digital skills ⁷	17	42	42	40	18	25

Source: Eurostat

Use of the internet for specific activities also decreases with age. Eurostat data from 2017 indicates that 53 per cent of Irish people made an online purchase in the previous 12 months, compared to only 18 per cent among the 60-74 cohort. CSO data shows that 78 percent of that age group have never shopped online.⁸

Impact on older people

An increasingly digitised society is affecting the lives of older people, even if they do not use the internet. The rise of email communication is a major factor in the closure of post offices. Banks are closing branches or restricting services. Many older customers have contacted Age Action to complain of feeling pressured by their bank to do their business online.

A move to online services may make sense from a commercial point of view but it creates barriers for many older people who are unable to carry out their day-to-day business online or are wary of doing so. In particular, this can prevent them from accessing financial services or lead to an older person handing control of their personal finances over to an IT literate friend or relative.

Government services are also actively encouraging people to carry out their tax returns, apply to renew their driving licences and passports online. Both the Revenue and the Passport Office are offering much shorter turnaround times for online business.

The reliance on online communications was very visible recently during Storm Emma when Government spokespersons advised people to monitor specific websites or digital platforms for updates. Accessing this online information was impossible for many older people.

Being unable to access the internet can also be expensive. It prevents older people from availing of discounts only available from service providers if they agree to online billing and in many cases a provider's terms and conditions are only available online.¹¹

For those older people who do get online it has the potential to change their lives. They can discover new hobbies, meet new people, access services more quickly and keep in touch with family.

⁶CSO 2017 Information Society Statistics Households http://pdf.cso.ie/www/pdf/20170721015046_Information_Society_Statistics__Households_2017_full.pdf

⁷Eurostat defines basic skills as being able to save a file, send an email or buy something online. Being able to do a minimum of two these is considered 'above basic'. The Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment defines a basic level of skills as Introduction to the internet; Internet safety and security; Email; Search engines and websites; Online government services; Conducting everyday transactions; Online voice and video calls; Use of "Apps". See <https://www.dccae.gov.ie/documents/Statement%20of%20Requirements%20Digital%20skills%20for%20Citizens.pdf>.

⁸<http://www.cso.ie/multiquicktables/quickTables.aspx?id=ica31>

Use of the internet has proven potential to deliver positive social and health related outcomes for older people, not least decreased feelings of loneliness and isolation.⁹

A 2014 American study of loneliness among older people found that regular use of the internet reduced depression by nearly a third and this was especially pronounced among those living alone:

“ Internet use substantially reduces the incidence of depression among retired older adults...with Internet use reducing depression categorization by 20%–28%.”¹⁰

Other older people have turned their online skills to successfully starting businesses or to campaigning on particular social issues. They have used communications technology to create, and restore, connections with family around the world.

Voices of older people¹⁴

“ I am 89 years of age and I live alone. Now I don't feel so alone, I can now communicate not only with friends in Ireland but also in other countries.”

Elaine, Meath

“ When I got home the first day, I sent emails while I cooked the evening meal to the astonishment of my family. Now I can do Facebook, texting and Google!”

Noel, Cavan

“ If you are unable to communicate with shops, the bank, the Post Office and transport companies – local or otherwise – then you could be in a great deal of trouble.”

George, Cork

Barriers to getting online

There are a number of barriers preventing older people from getting, and staying, online. Some of these are external; there may be no computer courses available locally. The older person may also have restricted mobility or even be housebound.

Older people are also more likely to live in rural communities and therefore to be among the hundreds of thousands of homes without any broadband coverage. It is not uncommon for an older learner to attend a computer training class in a large town and then be unable to practice their new skills because of the absence of broadband.

Other barriers relate to older people being anxious about trying to learn to use the internet, lacking confidence or having a fear of failure.¹² Ageism can have a detrimental impact on how an older person perceives their own ability to learn.¹³

Volunteer tutors with Age Action's Getting Started programme often report that their single biggest challenge is building up the confidence of learners. Once this initial reluctance is overcome, older learners are as able to master online technologies as anyone else.

⁹ A 2016 study by the Institute of Public Health found that 10 per cent of older people suffer from chronic loneliness and linked it to negative physical and mental health outcomes including anxiety, depression, increased risk of heart disease and higher stress levels. See Harvey, B. and Walsh, K., *Loneliness and Ageing: Ireland, North and South*, Institute of Public Health, 2016

¹⁰ Cotten et al, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, Volume 69, Issue 5, 1 September 2014, Pages 763–771

¹¹ Comments from members of an Age Action Glór group in Galway.

¹² Wu YH, et al (2015) Bridging the digital divide in older adults: a study from an initiative to inform older adults about new technologies. *Journal of Clinical Interventions in Aging* 10: 193-200

¹³ Neves BB, Amaro F (2012) Too old for technology? How the elderly of Lisbon use and perceive ICT. *The Journal of Community Information* 8: 1-12 <http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/800/904>

¹⁴ Throughout the paper names changed to protect the identity of the older person.

Cost of getting online

The cost of accessing the internet is also a contributing factor to people not getting online:

“ Socioeconomic factors such as the cost of a product and the socioeconomic status of an older adult are often reported to be related to technology use or adoption.” ¹⁵

Research published in Britain in 2014 found that eight per cent of households cited the cost of broadband subscriptions as a reason for not having internet access. A similar number identified the cost of the equipment as a barrier.¹⁶

An examination of the broadband-only deals available to Irish consumers in March 2018 indicated that the cost of a broadband subscription averaged out at just short of €50 per month.¹⁷ This is a substantial expenditure for someone dependent on the State Pension for their income.

Age Action welcomed the introduction of a Telephone Support Allowance in Budget 2018 of €2.50 per week. However, it is less than half the rate of the old Telephone Allowance and is restricted to individuals who live alone and who also qualify for the Fuel Allowance.

Voices of older people

“ I became computer literate...when I was 75...I am struggling to keep on my internet now as it is nearly €50 a month. We are told to go on line to do our business...yet those who supply the broadband seem to able to up their price whenever they want to.”

Denise, Dublin

Government's response

Since 2008 the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment has consecutively run two programmes designed to increase digital literacy:

1. The BenefitIT Programme, which ran to the middle of 2016, provided more than 160,000 training places over its lifetime at a cost of €8.4 million.¹⁸
2. This was replaced by the Digital Skills for Citizens Grant Scheme, which allocated €2.2 million for 2016/2017 to 15 community and not-for-profit organisations to provide 10 hours of free computer training to people across Ireland.^{19, 20}

While this training is open to anyone who has not previously used the internet, it is specifically targeted at

“ people over 45, farming communities, small business owners, the unemployed, persons with disabilities and disadvantaged groups ” ²¹

Both of these programmes have been successful in encouraging older people to get online. However, they can also be improved. There is no funding to allow an older person to repeat classes to cement learning and build up confidence. This can be especially important when a period of ill health means a substantial amount of time passes between classes.

¹⁵Wu YH, et al (2015) Bridging the digital divide in older adults: a study from an initiative to inform older adults about new technologies. Journal of Clinical Interventions in Aging 10: 193-200

¹⁶Office for National Statistics. Internet Access – Households and Individuals 2017

¹⁷<https://www.bonkers.ie/compare-tv-broadband-phone/s/cheapest-broadband-deals-in-ireland/>. Site accessed on 28 February 2018.

¹⁸Response to Parliamentary Question 3195/17 on 24 January 2017

¹⁹Response to Parliamentary Question 9078/17 on 22 February 2017

²⁰Age Action's Getting Started Programme has been a recipient of Government funding under both programmes.

²¹<https://www.dccae.gov.ie/documents/DCCAE%20Getting%20Citizens%20Online%20Programme.PDF>

Organisations funded under Digital Skills for Citizens must provide training to classes of no more than ten people. There is currently no incentive for organisations to deliver the classes in a one-to-one setting.

As shown below, one-to-one training allows a learner and tutor to build up a strong personal relationship and for the older person to go at their own pace and to concentrate on the areas where they need the most assistance.

Voices of older people

“ *The one-to-one format was most useful. I attended another computer course elsewhere. There were ten of us in the group with one instructor. I got very little out of it.*”

Ronan, Dublin

“ *The one to one arrangement took away any fear or anxiety that I may have had. My confidence in using my ipad really increased over the course of the lessons.*”

Maeve, Dublin

After ten years of these programmes digital literacy levels in Ireland among older people lag behind the EU average and far behind comparable EU neighbours.

There is a prevailing view that this is a problem that will resolve itself as future generations of older people will have grown up with the internet and will not require training or supports.²²

In reality, online technologies are adapting and evolving at an ever-faster pace. Technologies are constantly being made obsolete and new skills required. This creates a demand for ongoing technical support as well as ongoing learning.

It is impractical to believe that people who have only just learned how to use a computer will be able to install and set up new software, to diagnose malfunctions and viruses, and to install new hardware devices.

Age Action recommends that the Government should look at the British AbilityNet model, which provides ongoing technical support to older people and those with special needs including a freephone helpline and home visits for people with mobility difficulties.²³

Next Steps

Older people in Ireland must be empowered and enabled to be fully-fledged digital citizens, to use the internet to access information and services, to communicate with friends and family, to pursue education opportunities and to do their business online.

Successive governments have invested in programmes to assist older people to get online. The stark gap between internet use by older people in Ireland and those of our EU neighbours shows that these measures have not been enough.

Additional resources to provide and improve services for older people to get online are urgently needed. We must also identify new, innovative, ways to assist older people who are not comfortable with the internet.²⁴

²²McDonough CC (2016) The Effect of Ageism on the Digital Divide among older adults. Journal of Gerontological Medicine 2: 008

²³<https://www.abilitynet.org.uk/>

²⁴Recently the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment announced plans for a Digital Assist programme “where the post office will act as a digital gateway to Government”. Remarks by Patricia Quinn, Assistant Secretary at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment at the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment on 28 November 2017.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment

1. Immediately double funding for the Digital Skills for Citizens Grant Scheme to €4.4 million in Budget 2019 to provide more training places and to improve the scheme's coverage in rural Ireland.
2. Reform the Digital Skills for Citizens Grant Scheme to provide financial incentives to organisations to provide one-to-one training, to allow learners to repeat classes to build their confidence, to provide training in the older person's home where this is necessary and to provide technical support to the newly online.
3. Support older people on low incomes to access the internet by increasing the Telephone Support Allowance to €4 per week over the next two budgets at an estimated approximate cost of €17 million.²⁵
4. Develop and roll out a national digital skills learning programme, integrating it with existing community infrastructure, particularly libraries and post offices, and consider looking to the British Online Centres Network and AbilityNet in Britain as potential models.

²⁵Response to Parliamentary Question 10127/18 on 28 February 2018



An Roinn Tithíochta, Pleanála,
Pobail agus Rialtais Áitiúil
Department of Housing, Planning,
Community and Local Government



government supporting communities

The work of the Age Action policy team is supported by the Scheme to Support National Organisations, funded via the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, and administered by Pobal.