Digital Inclusion and an Ageing Population

Ensuring Equality and Rights for All of Us As We Age

Age Action
Age Equality

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About Age Action

Age Action is the leading advocacy organisation on ageing and older people in Ireland. Age Action advocates for a society that enables all older people to participate and to live full, independent lives, based on the realisation of their rights and equality, recognising the diversity of their experience and situation. Our mission is to achieve fundamental change in the lives of all older people by eliminating age discrimination, promoting positive ageing and securing their right to comprehensive and high-quality services.

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SUMMARY

275,000 people over the age of 65 are not using the internet, for a variety of reasons, and hundreds of thousands of others are counted as “online” but lack the basic skills required to allow them to make meaningful use of the internet, to access publicly funded services or to be safe from criminality online.

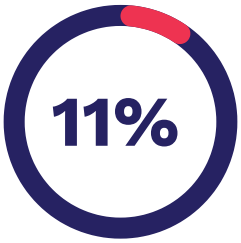
The EU has recognised multiple barriers to digital inclusion: “For some people, the digital world is not yet fully accessible. For others, it is not affordable. And others were not taught the skills to participate fully.” [1]

There are many examples in Ireland where publicly funded services, as well as private services, have adopted an effective “Digital Only” approach, which systematically discriminates again and excludes older people who are not using the internet.
Noting the digital divide between younger and older generations, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) states that “the choice to opt out of the use of digital technologies needs to remain, and maintaining continued offline access to essential services and human contact should be ensured.” [2]

To enable true digital inclusion of all older people, Age Actions calls on the state to implement three related policy responses:
• A rights-based approach to digital inclusion.
• A comprehensive strategy to maximise internet access, including making digital communications accessible to all, providing greater support for skills acquisition, and income supports to enable people to be digitally included.
• Continued provision and resourcing of “offline” alternatives to digital access to ensure equal access for those who are not using the internet.

1. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-inclusion
2. https://unece.org/media/Population/press/358156

Internet Usage

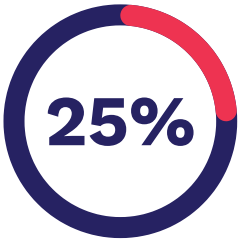


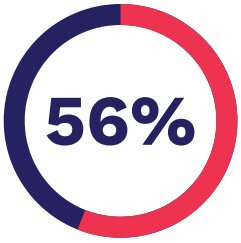
Internet Usage

11% of adults in Ireland were not using the internet in 2020.

60-74 Age Cohort

25% of people aged 60-74 are not using the internet





75+ Age Cohort

56% of people aged 75+ are not using the internet

people over the age of 65 are not using the internet

275,000

Source: Eurostat (2019) Digital skills: Individuals' level of digital skills. [isoc_sk_dskl_i] Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/digital-economy-and-society/data/database

> Too many older people remain digitally excluded. This was an issue during the last year+. Those online had a 'better quality lockdown' than those who had no access.

> I find the drive to do everything online, e.g. tax returns and banking, most stressful and unfair to older people. I also regret that one has to have a smartphone to exist in Ireland today.

> Finding it hard to cope with trying to find so much information online and practically being forced to go in that direction by Government (e.g. mygov.ie).

Respondents to Age Action's Lived Experience Survey for Budget 2022

AGE EQUALITY

The success story of longevity means that a greater proportion of people are living to retirement, and people are living longer in retirement.[3] As a result of this success, provision needs to be made for adequate public spending, which will naturally increase in a range of areas such as the State Pension, healthcare and social services.

The UN recognises that the environments in which we are born, grow, work and live strongly influence the opportunities available to each of us as we age. The WHO states that a significant proportion of the diversity in older age is due to the cumulative impact of health inequities across the life course, arising from people's physical and social environments and the impact of these environments on their opportunities and health behaviour. [4]

2020

720,100 65+

15% of population

including 170,800 80+

2035

1.1 million 65+

20% of population

including 340,000 80+

2050

1.5 million 65+

25% of population

including 540,000 80+

3. All data in this section is from the Central Statistics Office (CSO). Demographic projections for 2050 are taken from the middle of high to low estimates. Figures are rounded.
4. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health

Over the last 13 years, most people in Ireland have adopted internet use. However, an estimated that 11% of adults were not using the internet in 2020.[5]

The proportion of adults not using the internet includes one in four (25%) people aged 60-74 and more than half (56%) of people aged 75 or older. This implies that approximately 275,000 people over the age of 65 are not using the internet. Of those people aged 65-74 who are online, 43% have digital skills below basic levels and only 6% have "above basic" digital skills.[6] Combining those lacking basic skills with those not using the internet, 65% of older people are effectively digitally excluded.

Age Action's analysis is that there are four main reasons for older people not using the internet:

1. Barriers in terms of accessibility for people with disabilities or learning difficulties.
2. Barriers in terms of education and training to develop and maintain the necessary skills and confidence.
3. Barriers in terms of income and the affordability of digital devices and internet connections.
4. Some older people choose not to use the internet, which is a legitimate decision.

Having worked to support tens of thousands of older adults to use computers and the internet, Age Action has seen the evidence of the benefits and value that this can bring to many older people. Through our Information Services and consultations we have heard the digital issues that older people are concerned with, including the concerns of those who are not online.

It is likely that more older people will adapt to the internet over time. However, from an equality and human rights perspective, no one should be forced to access public services online. Those who are not using the internet are at risk of their rights, independence and opportunities being reduced due to digitalisation, unless active steps are taken to ensure their inclusion – including through non-digital forms of communication.

5. Based on the proportion of each age cohort who have not used the internet in the last three months (https://data.cso.ie/table/ICA78).

6. Eurostat (2019) Digital skills: Individuals' level of digital skills. [isoc_sk_dskl_i] Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/digital-economy-and-society/data/database

DIGITAL EXCLUSION

From the mid-1990s, warnings have been given about a likely social and economic divide between those who adopt ICT and internet technology and those who do not.[7] Research has shown that other forms of social exclusion manifest in greater digital exclusion, and digital exclusion can exacerbate other forms of social exclusion.[8]

The EU has recognised multiple barriers to digital inclusion: “For some people, the digital world is not yet fully accessible. For others, it is not affordable. And others were not taught the skills to participate fully.” [9]

The OECD defines the “digital divide” as “the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities.”

When it comes to explaining the divide, “the digital divide among households appears to depend primarily on two variables, income and education. Other variables, such as household size and type, age, gender, racial and linguistic backgrounds and location also play an important role.”[10]

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) recently highlighted key actions to ensure older persons’ digital inclusion, including ensuring equal access to goods and services involving digital technology, enhancing digital literacy to reduce the digital skills gaps, and ensuring the protection of the human rights of older persons in the digital era, including the rights to dignity, autonomy, privacy, and free and informed consent to the use of digital technology. “The choice to opt out of the use of digital technologies needs to remain, and maintaining continued offline access to essential services and human contact should be ensured.”[11]

7. For example, Ingersoll (1993) and Friedmann (1995), cited in Breathnach (2000) http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/3093/1/PB_niche_transnational_cities.pdf
8. Carnegie UK Trust (2016) The role of digital exclusion in social exclusion. https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2016/09/LOW-2697-CUKT-Digital-Participation-Report-REVISE.pdf
9. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-inclusion
10.OECD (2001) ‘Understanding the Digital Divide’, OECD Digital Economy Papers, No. 49, OECD Publishing, Paris https://doi.org/10.1787/236405667766
11. https://unece.org/media/Population/press/358156

> Most offers/reductions are only available online. Those not comfortable with online business pay more.

> I’m not using [Free Travel] due to having to book online now.

> Modern technology should be free for older people on low income.

Respondents to Age Action's Lived Experience Survey for Budget 2022

OLDER PEOPLE NOT USING THE INTERNET

It cannot be assumed that everyone who is alive today or even in twenty years' time will use the internet.

Digitalisation and the internet have transformed the economy, society and public services. Increasing number of people are going online, and this trend will continue. However, even if internet use will become a universal part of life for future generations, it cannot be assumed that everyone who is alive today or even in twenty years' time will use the internet. For example, a significant proportion of people aged 80+ today may never adapt to the internet, yet they are entitled to the full realisation of their human rights and equal access to public services through non-digital channels of communications.

Figure 1 shows the number of people who did not use the internet in the previous three months. Most non-users have never used the internet. [12] In 2007, more than two in every five (42%) adults aged 16-74 did not use the internet, whereas by 2016 this was fewer than one in five (18%). [13]

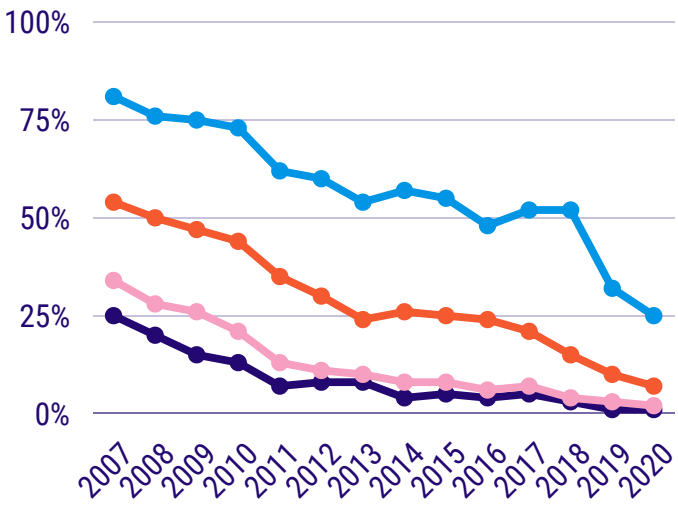


Figure 1. Percentage not using the internet by age group: 16-29, 30-44, 45-59 and 60-74 (CSO) – break in data series from 2017 [14]

Generational differences are clearly visible, with just 1% of 16-29 years olds not using the internet since 2019, down from 25% in 2007, compared to 25% of people aged 60-74 using the internet in 2020, down from 81% in 2007. Data on people aged 75 or older is only available from 2020, when it was recorded that 56% of them did not use the internet. [15]

12. https://data.cso.ie/table/ICA76
13. The 18% average refers to people aged 16-74, as those aged 75+ were not included in the earlier surveys.
14.CSO data showing people who have not used the internet in the last three months; 2007-2016 https://data.cso.ie/table/ICA19 and 2017-2020 https://data.cso.ie/table/ICA78. "All ages" refers to people aged 16-74 only.
15. https://data.cso.ie/table/ICA78

IMPACT OF COVID-19

COVID-19 has had a disproportionately negative effect on people who are digitally excluded. Public health services and other public services were moved online at a fast rate. People who were not using the internet were either at a disadvantage when it came to accessing services, or simply could not access services. Across Europe, response measures taken during the pandemic could leave victims of elder abuse in further isolation without access to assistance or support services, and may have made it even more difficult for them to seek help or to report abuse.[16]

While public policy in Ireland during the pandemic successfully prevented a much greater number of deaths among older people, the way in which policy was implemented had the unnecessary side-effect of reinforcing ageism and discrimination against older people. For example, one radio advertisement promoting public mental health supports during the pandemic referred people online exclusively to access further information.

Another example was the case of many older people in nursing homes who – in the face of restricted visiting – did not have the devices and/or skills to maintain connection with family members. As a result they were left without social interaction or the support of family members in making decisions about their care.

Being comfortable and competent with technology is not just related to being online. For example, during the pandemic many shops refused to accept cash as a preventative public health measure.[17] As a result many people felt they had no choice but to hand their financial affairs to someone more digitally literate or to opt into digital services they did not understand.

The UN has noted that barriers that older persons face related to literacy and language may have been magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic.[18]

16. Age Platform EU (May 2020) COVID-19 and human rights concerns for older persons. Available at www.age-platform.eu.
17. https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/blog/date/2020/html/ecb.blog200428~328d7ca065.en.html.
18. UN Secretary General (May 2020) Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on older persons. Available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2020/05/COVID-Older-persons.pdf.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

Those who lack access and skills to go online did not receive supports to address unequal access to:

- Information
  updates on Government policy
  updates on consumer and advice or information, e.g. travel, refunds

- Social/emotional connection
  video calls
  online interest groups

- Commercial transactions
  online shopping for food, household goods, clothing, bedding, appliances, health aids

- Health information
  information on minor ailments
  access to online booking for GPs who often could not be contacted by phone

- Physical and mental health promotion
  home exercise videos/guidance
  entertainment and cultural content
  information on hobbies to learn
  ability to upload content as part of a community

- Services (examples)
  information on mental health and bereavement supports
  public transport options
  renewal of driving licences
  telehealth services.

16. Age Platform EU (May 2020) COVID-19 and human rights concerns for older persons. Available at www.age-platform.eu.
17. https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/blog/date/2020/html/ecb.blog200428~328d7ca065.en.html.
18. UN Secretary General (May 2020) Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on older persons. Available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2020/05/COVID-Older-persons.pdf.

ONLINE CRIMINALITY

A major concern in relation to inadequate digital skills is that people with a basic or below basic level of skills are more susceptible to fraud and other criminal activity online, which are increasing in both frequency and sophistication.[19]

The Department of Justice defines "cybercrime" as comprising a mixture of "traditional offences (e.g. fraud, forgery and identity theft); content related offences (e.g. online distribution of child sexual abuse material, hate speech or incitement to commit acts of terrorism); and offences unique to computers and information systems (e.g. attacks against such systems, spread of malware, hacking to steal sensitive, personal or industry data and denial of service attacks to cause financial and/or reputational damage."[20]

While more people are going online, they are not all acquiring the skills to stay safe from fraudulent practices. Large numbers of people experience online fraud on an annual basis. A Eurobarometer survey found that more than one in eight people (13%) have experienced internet fraud and one in 11 (9%) have experienced identity theft. [21]

A special Eurobarometer report published in January 2020 examined public concern about cybercrime.[22] Across Europe, just over half of respondents (52%) feel well informed about cybercrime, but only 11% feel very well informed. Three quarters (76%) believe that the risk of becoming a victim of cybercrime is increasing. However fewer (52%) think they can protect themselves sufficiently against it – and this represents a decline of nine percentage point since 2018. Only a minority in each country are aware of official channels for reporting these crimes.

At least six in ten are concerned their online personal information is not kept secure by websites (68%) or public authorities (61%), and almost eight in ten (78%) avoid disclosing personal information online. Respondents have changed their behaviour in some way, such as not opening emails from unknown persons (42%), installing antivirus programmes or applications (42%), only visiting websites they know and trust (32%), or only using their own computer.

19. http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Cybercrime_-_Current_Threats_and_Responses.pdf/Files/Cybercrime_-_Current_Threats_and_Responses.pdf
20 http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Cybercrime
https://www.irishtimes.com/business/technology/13-of-irish-internet-users-have-suffered-online-fraud-1.209978
22.https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2249

ONLINE CRIMINALITY

Half of all respondents knew of someone who has been a victim of one of the cybercrimes asked about, with the most mentioned being receiving fraudulent emails or phone calls asking for personal details (25%) or discovering malicious software on their device (21%). Many respondents had personally been victims of cybercrime, with the most common being receiving fraudulent emails or phone calls asking for their personal details (36%) or discovering malicious software on their device (28%).

Irish respondents were ranked fifth highest (at 53%) among those who "are concerned about someone misusing their personal data" (EU average 48%). Irish respondents were most concerned (at 52%) about the security of online payments (EU average 41%). Yet Irish respondents were among the lowest ranked (at 38%) for changing their behaviour online due to security concerns. More than a third (37%) of Irish respondents felt "not well informed" about the risks of cybercrime (EU average 47%).

Across the Eurobarometer survey data, older people are generally less trusting or feel less informed than younger people. Recent CSO data shows that people aged 60-74 were least likely of all age groups to undertake personal data management actions, such as checking that a website was secure or refusing use of their personal data for advertising. [23]

23. CSO (2020) Information Society Statistics - Households 2020. Available at www.cso.ie.

> [Older people need] adequate technical skills to end life as a compliant citizen instead of being frustrated to tears by the bullying, brow-beating 'it's easier online' arms of the state.

> That older people are given assistance in relation to real difficulties around computers.

> People need a subsidy to pay for broadband so they can stay connected, informed and avail of medical monitoring, etc.

Respondents to Age Action's Lived Experience Survey for Budget 2022

GOVERNMENT POLICY

In June 2020, Ireland was party to an ambitious set of European Council conclusions on Shaping Europe's Digital Future.[24] COVID-19 has accelerated the move online, and digitalisation is seen as central to post-pandemic recovery and to the achievement of Europe's climate targets.

The European Union declared a "digital decade" from 2021, with ambitious targets for 2030, including having 80% of the population aged 16-74 acquire basic digital skills and having 100% of key public services online. The EU plans to develop a set of "digital principles and rights" to complement the European Pillar of Social Rights, including protection of personal data and privacy, and universal access to internet services and to digital health services.[25]

The main Irish Government policy has been the National Digital Strategy (2013). The Government carried out a consultation on the strategy in 2018, with the aim of publishing a revised strategy, which is also a commitment of the current programme for government. The strategy recognises that older people are among those least likely to be online.[26] Other relevant policies include the National Broadband Plan, as well as economic policies such as Future Jobs Ireland.

All city and county councils are required to develop a digital strategy and a number of these are complete. A range of national plans on social inclusion have digital skills training as part of their remit, "However, the current Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 does not have a strong developmental focus on this".[27]

In July 2021, NESC published Digital Inclusion in Ireland: Connectivity, Devices and Skills.[28] The report recognises that "a number of groups are poorly engaged with ICT, in particular those who are older, have lower levels of education, lower incomes, and live in rural areas." According to the report, "the key dimensions of digital exclusion are connectivity, access to devices, skills, and the confidence to engage with ICT."
The NESC report makes five overarching recommendations:

- Develop a national strategy for digital inclusion, with a key focus on co-ordination, and with a strong commitment to fine-grained measurement of progress.
- Create a comprehensive framework for digital skills progression.
- Support digital inclusion at community level.

24.https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8711-2020-INIT/en/pdf
25.https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en
26. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f4a16b-national-digital-strategy/
27.http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/154_Digital.pdf
28.http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/154_Digital.pdf

GOVERNMENT POLICY

- Deliver targeted supports for material access to key groups.
- Enhance guidance for digital and assisted-digital public services, and 'complementary' channels.

The report notes that "Older Irish people have much lower levels of digital skills than their counterparts in other EU countries. For example, 33 per cent of Irish people aged 65-74 had never used the internet in 2019, compared to 11 per cent in Britain." In addition to concern about the number of people who are not online, there is also concern about people who lack the necessary skills to use the internet effectively or who are at risk of being a victim of fraud or other criminality when online.

The European Commission's European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp) describes eight levels of competency with internet use, from basic skills through to confident, critical use of digital technologies.[29] It is important to recognise the extent and depth of skills required to take full advantage of the opportunities granted by the internet, as it is insufficient to assume basic training is all that people need to be successful online.

NESC notes that "Ireland does not have such a framework in relation to digital skills, although the forthcoming National Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy may change this."

24.https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8711-2020-INIT/en/pdf
25.https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en
26. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f4a16b-national-digital-strategy/
27.http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/154_Digital.pdf
28.http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/154_Digital.pdf
29. https://op.europa.eu/s/pnbI

“DIGITAL FIRST” SHOULD NOT MEAN “DIGITAL ONLY”

The Public Service ICT Strategy (2015) provides the framework for government departments and public agencies to improve their use of digitalisation. One of five strategic objectives in the strategy is “Digital First”, meaning that “Government should use the appropriate mix of electronic channels of communication and engagement to improve citizen satisfaction in service delivery, reach new levels of engagement and trust, and increase efficiency within the Public Service.”[30]

The eGovernment Strategy 2017-2020 sets out to further increase the use of digital, including a policy of “Digital by Default” through which the state “will deliver services digitally as the preferred option through a single contact point or a one-stop-shop and via different channels.” Importantly, the strategy commits that the state will “still keep other channels open for those who are disconnected by choice or necessity” and it “will explore ‘assisted digital’ for those who feel they would benefit from such a service.”

From the point of view of digital inclusion, important elements of this objective include improving people’s satisfaction and using the “appropriate mix” of communication channels.

However, there is a risk that some public agencies are adopting an effective “Digital Only” approach, or at least one where alternatives to digital access are decidedly inferior.
With the drive for many activities to be done online – whether by public agencies or private enterprises – many older people are forced to either take risks with their personal data, or else rely on others who are more digitally literate. Reliance on others can reduce a person’s autonomy and often requires sharing confidential or private information with others, whether they are family, friends, neighbours or professionals.

For example, driving is essential for many older people’s mobility and autonomy, particularly in rural areas or for those with limited walking stamina. When the Road Safety Authority shifted to an appointment-only system for driver license renewal in 2020, appointment booking was only available online. Many older people were forced to allow others to manage their affairs to maintain their ability to drive.

30. https://ictstrategy.per.gov.ie/ictstrategy/files/Public%20Service%20ICT%20Strategy.pdf

Age Action took many calls from older drivers with nowhere else to turn, who handed over personal identity information such as PPS numbers so that appointments could be made for them. This scenario highlights the risk of elder abuse, identity theft or fraud, all because a public service chose a “Digital Only” policy.

Another example of “Digital Only” exclusion is the COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form. This form is only available online and it is a legal requirement for certain passengers arriving in Ireland to complete the form with substantial penalties for failing to do so. [31] Someone without access to ICT is forced to ask someone else to go online to download the form, complete it and email it to the Department of Foreign Affairs on their behalf. This also potentially creates a data protection issue, as the third party’s email address used to send the form is then held by the Department and associated with the application. The Department of Transport has said that it will assist at ports and airports, with digital devices and support available to allow people to complete the form, but Age Action has heard concern that older people arriving from abroad will not receive any assistance in foreign ports or airports where the form must be completed.

In other illustrative cases reported to Age Action’s Information Service: Irish Rail held a public consultation process on the upgrading of a local train station exclusively online, which excluded those unable to use the internet; a local GP practice required all requests for repeat prescriptions or sickness certificates to be sent by email; and a building society account is no longer usable for some customers as it now requires use of an app on a smartphone to allow the account holder to pay bills. These cases are accompanied by personal stories from the people affected, who feel a loss of independence and privacy, a loss of control over their own affairs, and a sense of being dismissed by society. In one poignant example, a couple in their 80s had their marriage delayed due to the online system. As one of their daughters describes “It had been the pair's wish for a long time to get married, but they had difficulty with the paperwork... Nowadays everything is online and on the internet and they just couldn't manage it”.[32]

31. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ab900-covid-19-passenger-locator-form/
32. RTÉ (24 October 2020). ‘Elderly Offaly couple marry 40 years after they first met’. Available at: 32. https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2020/1023/1173586-covid-19-wedding/

Systemic issues have also arisen in relation to certain policies. For example, the COVID-19 tracker app and e-health tools have been rolled out without any supports to enable older people to engage. Choice-based letting for social housing is through an online system only, with time-sensitive applications. This clearly disadvantages those who are not online, or who access internet only intermittently at a library for example. [33]

When it comes to Government forms, of those who do not submit official forms online, older people are the most likely to report the reason being lack of skills or knowledge.[34]

33. The Housing Agency. Social Housing Waitlists and Allocations. Available at: http://www.housingagency.ie/housing-information/social-housing-waiting-lists-and-allocations

34. 10% of 60-74 years old internet users who didn't submit online government forms said it was due to lack of skills or knowledge in 2020, down from 18% in 2019. This compares to much lower levels among younger people, at 4% of 45-59 yo and 1% of 30-44yo; CSO (2020). Information Society Statistics - Households. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-isshh/informationsocietystatistics-households2020/e-government/

AGE ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

An older person's choice about whether or not to use the internet should not affect their access to services or their basic human rights such as health and independence. For those who do wish to learn digital skills, the internet can offer many opportunities to support personal rights, needs and interests, which should be promoted. At present, approximately 275,000 older people do not use the internet and while some of them wish to do so, others clearly do not.

To enable the inclusion of all older people, three interrelated policy responses are required. Firstly, the state should take a rights-based approach to digital inclusion. Secondly, a comprehensive approach is needed to ensure people can access the internet, including ensuring digital channels of communications are accessible to all, supporting digital skills acquisition, and providing income supports to overcome barriers to acquiring and maintaining digital devices and internet connections. Thirdly, investment is required to maintain non-digital channels, to ensure equality of access for those who wish to use non-digital channels of communication.

1. A Rights-Based Approach to Digital Inclusion

Age Action welcomes the Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty, which takes a right-based approach to how all publicly funded services are provided.[35] In this context, and in the context of an increasing digitisation of services, an audit of publicly funded services is needed to determine whether everyone has equal access. A rights-based approach to publicly funded services means ensuring that no one is disadvantaged by the mode of communication that they choose to use.

In some cases, a rights-based approach will require services to be actively promoted among potential service users who are not online, to reach those who may be least aware of their options or entitlements.

The PANEL principles are an international standard for human rights that should be mainstreamed across all publicly funded services, in line with the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.[36]

35. IHREC (2019) Implementing the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty. Available at www.ihrec.ie.
36. See, for example, https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/projects-and-programmes/human-rights-based-approach/

AGE ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

In terms of avoiding digital exclusion, the PANEL principles provide a framework for planning services:

- Participation: People should be involved in decisions that affect their rights.
- Accountability: There should be monitoring of how people's rights are being affected, as well as remedies when things go wrong.
- Non-Discrimination and Equality: All forms of discrimination must be prohibited, prevented, and eliminated; including ageism and age discrimination. People who face the biggest barriers to realising their rights should be prioritised.
- Empowerment: Everyone should understand their rights and be fully supported to take part in developing policy and practices which affect their lives.
- Legality: there should be an explicit application of human rights law and standards.

A rights-based approach to delivering services would prohibit "Digital Only" access to publicly funded services, including banning practices that effectively force people online due to poor quality or hard to access alternative communications options.

Publicly funded services should not make a naïve assumption that all older people have adult children who can assist them or that they would want that.[37] A rights-based approach must enable the capacity of individuals to live independently and to maintain their privacy. As a result of being forced to transact online, a large proportion of older people lose independence and are required to divulge their private information to others. A lack of understanding of technical terms may also hamper a person's capacity to give meaningful consent to terms and conditions.

In situations where it is necessary for services to require someone to make an online transaction, publicly funded systems should be established to safeguard those offline who currently hand over their affairs to others that are more digitally literate. For example, a trusted professional proxy service could be created through the Citizens' Information Service that, with consent and direction, could take control of an individual's data when completing online forms.[38]

37. Moreover, assistance from family is quite obviously not possible for the many couples and single individuals who do not have children. For example, despite Ireland's overall high birth rates, one in five (19%) women do not have children [https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm]. Assistance from adult children is also not possible for the many older people whose children may not live near them or who may not be able or willing to support them.
38. Citizens Information Service (2019). Accessibility of online services to older people in Co. Wicklow. Available at: https://www.citizensinformationboard.ie/downloads/social_policy/Accessibility_online_services.pdf

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2. Comprehensive Internet Access for Older People

Even when older people want to use the internet, many of them are affected by three separate barriers that prevent them from doing so:

- Barriers of accessibility
- Barriers of education and training
- Barriers of income and affordability

Digital exclusion must be addressed in a coordinated, whole-of-Government approach to strategy and funding. The digital skills needs and offline access needs of older people occur in interactions with diverse public services, and access to services can be limited by the current piecemeal approach. The remit for digital access and supports currently sits across several government departments. To ensure better coordination between strategies and to eradicate gaps in delivery of supports online and offline, better integration is needed across all relevant strategies.

Capturing and analysis of representative data is needed for evidence-based policies. An audit of the digital skills needs of those in older age (aged 55+) is needed, and this should be further disaggregated by age group and include information on people's level of digital literacy.

Digital modes of communication may be inaccessible to people with various disabilities, especially those with sight loss or visual impairment, and to people with learning difficulties, mental health issues or intellectual disabilities, as well as the one in six adults who have literacy difficulties. Ireland has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 pledges to "promote the design of public sector websites in accordance with universal design principles." [39] The eGovernment Strategy 2017-2020 promotes inclusiveness and accessibility (including adoption of universal design principles) and it refers to the EU Directive COM (2012)721 that requires the websites and mobile apps of public sector bodies to be more accessible, and to the Disability Act 2005 (Code of Practice) (Declaration) Order 2006.[40]

Further policies – and implementation and enforcement of existing commitments – are needed to ensure comprehensive access to the internet for everyone with a disability. The Internet Society has published guidance for policymakers on increasing internet use by people with disabilities.[41]

39. http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/dept-justice-ndi-inclusion-stratgey-booklet.pdf/Files/dept-justice-ndi-inclusion-stratgey-booklet.pdf
40. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/63a31-egovernment-strategy-20172020/ https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/63a31-egovernment-strategy-20172020/
41. http://nda.ie/Good-practice/Codes-of-Practice/Code-of-Practice-on-Accessibility-of-Public-Services-and-Information-Provided-by-Public-Bodies-/

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Further policies – and implementation and enforcement of existing commitments – are needed to ensure comprehensive access to the internet for everyone with a disability. The Internet Society has published guidance for policymakers on increasing internet use by people with disabilities.[41] The National Disability Authority (NDA) have a Code of Practice on Accessibility of Public Services and Information Provided by Public Bodies.[42] As a basic measure of equality, digital channels of communication should be made as accessible as possible regardless of any disability, learning difficulty or literacy difficulty that a user may have.

In-depth training and skills acquisition programmes should receive increased public funding. Government digital skills training feedback shows that 44% of digital literacy training participants feel less isolated after completing training.[43] First-hand experience from Age Action's programmes shows the difference that digital literacy training and support can make to people who want to become digitally engaged.

People can find their lives enriched in ways that are meaningful to them, and that promote health, connection and engagement. Digital skills training can be expected to be an ongoing need as long as technology continues to evolve at pace, and all new planning across Government should account for this in setting an approach and principles to determining firstly, what constitutes digital knowledge required to participate effectively in everyday life and, secondly, to allow for broadening of training scope in future to accommodate these shifts.

Looking at how digital skills are taught, Age Action has found that where one-to-one classes are learner-led, older people are as able as other age groups to learn new skills. The EU DIGITOL project echoes this and showed that where older people have digital skills, they are willing to improve skills in similar online domains as younger people, such as paying taxes, banking, shopping, engaging in public consultations and identifying fake news.[44]

41 https://www.internetsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/bp-accessibilitypaper-20121105-en.pdf
42. http://nda.ie/Good-practice/Codes-of-Practice/Code-of-Practice-on-Accessibility-of-Public-Services-and-Information-Provided-by-Public-Bodies-/
43. Bill Morrissey, DCCAE (2019). Statement to Joint Committee on Education and Skills. Available at: https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/submissions/2019/2019-11-19_opening-statement-bill-morrissey-principal-officer-department-of-communications-climate-action-and-the-environment_en.pdf
44.AGE Platform (2020) AGE input to the consultation: Digital Education Action Plan. Available at www.age-platform.eu.

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Many older people wish to engage in literacy supports across the spectrum to improve their employability or as part of a wider reskilling package. It is crucial that the programme for government commitment to a new 10-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy, and digital skills recognises the evidence about what works for older learners to acquire the necessary digital skills.

Many older learners benefit from one-to-one training, especially if they are nervous about approaching technology, if they have negative memories of learning or if they have cognitive difficulties that require tailored delivery or time to reinforce content. Age Action also sees many enthusiastic learners who are unable to complete training due to factors outside their control, and allowances should be made to enable people in these situations to gain competence and to continue training. For example, some older people have chronic conditions that may flare up, have medical procedures or emergencies, be caring for others who may have medical procedures or urgent needs, or be reliant on others for transport which may fall through, among many other reasons that interrupt structured learning times.

Publicly funded programmes for digital skills should take account of the lived experience and learning needs of older people. The content of digital skills, digital literacy training should be focused on that which is meaningful to people's lives. This means there is need for some digital outreach and familiarisation supports focused purely on engagement and understanding the basics and the potential of the internet, and not formatted as formal training, certification or set modules. Once there is initial engagement, further engagement can be structured according to identified outcomes or priorities.

Government-funded general digital skills training for older people should be learner-led, involve one-to-one tuition and be grounded in a lifelong learning approach. In practice, this means flexible content guided by the learner's needs and pace – including time to learn the basics of using a mouse, keyboard and computer where needed – as well as training offered in the older person's home or residential institution where this is needed.

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A strong focus should be placed on building people's confidence and achieving long-term outcomes through bringing people up to a high level in the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens where they can be autonomous and safe online. This level of training requires a much greater investment of time than the current Government approach of limiting funding for training to a maximum of ten hours per person in their lifetime.[45] A lifelong learning approach would provide support to people to update their skills on a regular basis, as well as to provide them with support when they encounter new difficulties when using technology.

A lifelong learning approach would provide support to people to update their skills on a regular basis, as well as to provide them with support when they encounter new difficulties when using technology.

Through the years of providing digital training, Age Action has continued to receive calls for technical support from students long after classes have ended. Many relate to auto-updates on devices or simple software issues.

Without the capacity for ongoing technical support some people can end up locked out of or unable to use their devices. As part of a comprehensive approach to supporting the maximum number of people to be digitally included, publicly funded programmes should support continued outreach, engagement and technical support. This level of support should be stable, long-term and with sufficient capacity to meet the needs of the number of older people in need of ongoing digital support. A free telephone helpline should be funded to offer simple technical support and advice to maintain digital skills over time.

Access to digital skills support should be easy to find, such as through dedicated mentors in libraries to assist with simple day-to-day tasks or troubleshooting, or through nominated digital champions in frontline services who can assist where needed.

Central to the development of any new measures to address digital inclusion is the explicit recognition of Government's responsibility to ensure a coordinated approach to being – and staying – online.

45.https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/cb7ce-digital-skills-for-citizens-scheme/

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For many older people, three-quarters of whom rely on the State Pension for all or more of their income, the costs involved in digital communications can be prohibitive, especially given the effective requirement to replace or upgrade obsolete devices or software on a regular basis. The importance that public policy places on e-government and online public services (not least telehealth) must be matched by a commitment to assist people to overcome cost barriers to being online.
Age Action consistently receives feedback across our classes that the cost of devices and broadband, and poor quality of internet access in many regions, continues to be major barriers to digital skills acquisition. Income supports – and liaison with private sector companies to address costs for device and internet access – are needed for lower income households.

There is increased reliance on smart technology to aid people to live at home independently for longer. This is a highly desirable objective, but to achieve it publicly funded services providing smart technology at home should enable people's capacity to give meaningful consent to the impact of the technology, including how their data will be used.

Employment is also negatively affected for many older people as digital skills are the gateway to accessing a broad range of jobs, to perform a wider range of jobs or to access promotions, and most importantly since the COVID-19 pandemic, to work remotely. Of those who had their employment affected by COVID-19, those over 55 were among the least likely to have started remote working.[46]

In the context of offering people real opportunities to change jobs later in life, as well as noting that people may choose to work beyond traditional retirement age, Government programmes for digital skills should recognise and integrate employment skills as a defined aim for older learners. This type of training should target skills needed in the workplace or to enable working from home. This training should be available regardless of employment status to support older people to access diverse career opportunities, promotions, remote working, and broader opportunities for job searches. Given the barriers that many older people find to accessing employment later in life, offering this training only to the unemployed would be too late for many.

45.https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/cb7ce-digital-skills-for-citizens-scheme/
46.CSO (April 2020). Employment and Life Effects of COVID-19. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/elec19/employmentandlifeeffectsofcovid-19/

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3. Continued Provision of Alternatives to Digital Access

It is not reasonable to expect all older people to use the internet. The estimated 275,000 people aged 65+ who do not use the internet represent 1 in every 13 adults in Ireland (7.4%), and this includes a cohort of people who – for a variety of reasons, including choice – will never use the internet. In addition, there are hundreds of thousands of older people who are counted as being "online" but who lack adequate digital skills, as result of which they cannot use the internet in ways that are meaningful to them and they may lack the necessary knowledge and skills to access publicly funded services online.

At home, only half (50.6%) of households headed by people aged 65+ have a personal computer and just over half (51.3%) have broadband internet access. Another 5.1% have internet but not broadband.

However, nearly half (46.3%) do not have a personal computer and two in five (40.8%) do not have internet access. Of older people living alone, two-thirds (65.6%) do not have a computer and three in every five (60.8%) do not have internet access. As such, there are around 100,000 older people living alone who do not have internet access.[47]

While the public sector ICT strategy aims for services to be "Digital First", it is imperative that the Government clarifies the requirement that all public services must be equally and easily available to those not online or with limited digital skills. A rights-based approach to delivery of public services should ensure that those offline by choice or necessity do not suffer any greater difficulty in accessing services. As described earlier, Age Action receives regular calls from people unable to access basic information or services due to being offline.

At present, most public services continue to provide an alternative route to access services, such as a phone number or a postal address. However, that does not mean that these alternatives are adequate. The following principles outline what is required of alternatives to digital access.

47.Census 2016, https://data.cso.ie/table/E1057

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Publicly funded bodies should have clear, transparent and visible alternative routes to access services, such as designated access points for face-to-face communication and an easy to navigate telephone service. Those using alternatives to online should not be treated less favourably, for example being required to stand in line or wait on the phone for long periods. This requires that alternative routes to access services should be adequately staffed.

Access to services by non-digital means should not require digital access; for example, postal forms should not only be available as downloads from a website, and non-digital contact details should not only be available on a website. Care is needed to ensure that automated telephone answering systems, such as those relying on voice recognition, are accessible to all.

Participation in public life and policy consultation is often limited to a system of online notification of consultations, with short response timeframes. Public meetings are only held only in rare cases – even prior to the pandemic.

Government taskforces and working groups, for example the Women's Health Taskforce, have no way for the public to keep up to date with their work except through digital communications. Publicly funded agencies involved in consultations or other forms of public participation must take active steps to engage people who are not online. A standardised model for public participation and policy consultation for people who are offline should be developed and applied across the state, including local government. Key elements for inclusion include free methods of being notified of consultations (such as post), free access to consultation documents, and a minimum time period for consultation on national policies to enable offline awareness and contribution. There needs to be a focus on the "furthest behind first" to ensure access to information, services and participation. For example, active steps should be taken to enable participation in policy consultation for those currently offline in residential institutions.

Digital Skills in Action

Since 2006, Age Action has been providing classes for older people in computers and internet use. These are learner-led and involve one-to-one tuition to ensure that older people gain the necessary depth and breadth of skills and information that they need to be confident, competent and safe online.

Age Action has helped over 44,000 people through this programme. The list of ways that people have empowered themselves through digital literacy is long and diverse. Through developing the necessary skills, many grandparents have learned to videocall grandchildren overseas, farmers have accessed online farming publications and car sales listings, small business owners have used online tools to translate email enquiries, patients have lodged health insurance claims online, and workers have acquired the necessary skills to work from home and to start businesses. Since the pandemic, Age Action has also assisted learners to attend events online such as committee meetings and religious services, to shop online, and to use the RTÉ Player.

> “I never used a computer in my life, didn’t even have a calculator in work and Age Action have given me the confidence to use technology. It has given me great reassurance that if I ever got sick I could cope a lot better. I feel confident shopping online now. I have a new phone and I am really enjoying using Google on it now. I search for new recipes and cooking tips and access the news online anytime I want to now.”

I can manage now to access and engage with my loved ones on WhatsApp. It has opened up a new world to me. I feel more engaged with the world now which is especially needed during this isolating time. I can even ask Google a question using my voice. I didn't believe this was possible at first but it is great.

My tutor was a very good teacher, patient and helpful in so many ways. e.g. how to look up RIP, bus times, RTÉ Player, YouTube, list of candidates for the election which was very helpful at the time, and I was able to help others too in finding the candidates for their area.

Summary of Recommendations

1. A Rights-Based Approach to Digital Inclusion

- Prohibit “Digital Only” access to publicly funded services
- A rights-based approach must enable the capacity of individuals to live independently and to maintain their privacy
- Publicly funded systems should be established to safeguard those offline who currently hand over their affairs to others that are more digitally literate.

2. Comprehensive Internet Access for Older People

- Digital exclusion must be addressed in a coordinated, whole-of-Government approach to strategy and funding
- Capturing and analysis of representative data is needed for evidence-based policies
- Digital channels of communication should be made as accessible as possible regardless of any disability, learning difficulty or literacy difficulty that a user may have
- In-depth training and skills acquisition programmes should receive increased public funding.
- It is crucial that the programme for government commitment to a new 10-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy, and digital skills recognises the evidence about what works for older learners to acquire the necessary digital skills
- Publicly funded programmes for digital skills should take account of the lived experience and learning needs of older people
- Government-funded general digital skills training for older people should be learner-led, involve one-to-one tuition and be grounded in a lifelong learning approach
- Publicly funded programme should support continued outreach, engagement and technical support
- A free telephone helpline should be funded
- Access to digital skills support should be easy to find
- The importance that public policy places on e-government and online public services (not least e-health) must be matched by a commitment to assist people to overcome cost barriers to being online.

- Income supports – and liaison with private sector companies to address costs for device and internet access – are needed for lower income households

- Publicly funded services providing smart technology at home should enable people's capacity to give meaningful consent to the impact of the technology, including how their data will be used

- Government programmes for digital skills should recognise and integrate employment skills as a defined aim for older learners.

3. Continued Provision of Alternatives to Digital Access

- It is imperative that the Government clarifies the requirement that all public services must be equally and easily available to those not online or with limited digital skills

- Publicly funded bodies should have clear, transparent and visible alternative routes to access services.

- Alternative routes to access services should be adequately staffed

- Access to services by non-digital means should not require digital access

- Ensure that automated telephone answering systems, such as those relying on voice recognition, are accessible to all

- Publicly funded agencies involved in consultations or other forms of public participation must take active steps to engage people who are not online

- There needs to be a focus on the "furthest behind first" to ensure access to information, services and participation.