

Digital Inclusion and an Ageing Population

**Ensuring Equality and
Rights for All of Us As
We Age**

Summary Policy Brief

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Full Policy Brief is available at
https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/digital_inclusion_and_an_ageing_population.pdf

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 against 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:

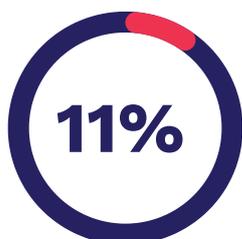
- A rights-based approach to digital inclusion.
- A comprehensive strategy to maximise internet access, including making digital communications accessible to all, providing greater support for skills acquisition, and income supports to enable people to be digitally included.
- Continued provision and 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

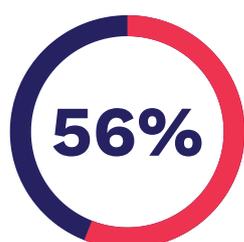


Internet Usage

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

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.[4] Research has shown that other forms of social exclusion manifest in greater digital exclusion, and digital exclusion can exacerbate other forms of social exclusion.[5]

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.” [6]

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.”[7]

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.”[8]

4. For example, Ingersoll (1993) and Friedmann (1995), cited in Breathnach (2000) http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/3093/1/PB_niche_transnational_cities.pdf

5. 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

6. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-inclusion>

7. OECD (2001) ‘Understanding the Digital Divide’, OECD Digital Economy Papers, No. 49, OECD Publishing, Paris <https://doi.org/10.1787/236405667766>

8. <https://unece.org/media/Population/press/358156>

GOVERNMENT POLICY

In June 2020, Ireland was party to an ambitious set of European Council conclusions on Shaping Europe's Digital Future.[9] 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.[10]

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.[11] 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".[12]

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."[13]

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."

9. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8711-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

10. https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en

11. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f4a16b-national-digital-strategy/>

12. http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/154_Digital.pdf

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

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.”

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.

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 programmes 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.
- 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.

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.

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.



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

