



Briefing Paper 6

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SUPPORTING DIGITAL LITERACY AMONG OLDER PEOPLE

Introduction

Age Action works to empower and enable the voices of older people to be influential at all levels of society and government. However, a generation of older people is being left out of an increasingly online Ireland which fails to support and empower them to fully participate in our society as digital citizens.

The definition of 'literacy' today includes being able to use simple, everyday technology to communicate and handle information.¹ Literacy issues around technology exclude a large group of people in society from social, educational, financial and commercial opportunities.

Most people in Ireland would struggle to imagine how to get by without the internet - 2 in 3 people use the internet several times a day.² From giving directions in the car, finding out about events and talking to family and friends overseas for free, to looking up recipes, paying bills, and comparing the best prices for appliances, the internet is an integral part of life for most of us.

But over half of Irish people aged between 65 and 74 have never used the internet, locking older people out of a huge range of benefits. It is not for lack of interest either: 30% of Irish

¹ National Adult Literacy Agency. See <https://www.nala.ie/literacy-and-numeracy-in-ireland/>

² Central Statistics Office (2018) *Information Society Statistics - Households 2018*. Available at <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/isslh/information societystatistics-households2018/>

households without internet access say the reason is a lack of skills to use it.³ Simply, without the ability to confidently navigate the internet, a significant proportion of our population are effectively barred from being fully engaged members of society. A lack of digital literacy has a huge impact on the ability to access services and information, to stay independent for longer, to save money, to participate in the development of national policy, teach and learn skills, and stay connected to community, culture and news.

Government's consistent underfunding of digital literacy programmes is clear when we compare ourselves with other places. In the EU28, 37% of 65-74 year olds have never been on the internet, and in Britain this is just 16%, compared to 55% in Ireland.⁴ Where the percentage of those aged 65-74 who have never used the internet has steadily fallen in the EU28 by 25 percentage points from 2009 to 2018, in Ireland this rate has fallen by only 4 percentage points in the same time.

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

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.⁵ Despite this image, current levels of digital literacy among older people continue to lag far behind our nearest neighbour and comparable EU states.

The data paints a picture of the inadequacy of Government spending on digital literacy for a changing population. For example, in 2009 Ireland was in a similar position to Austria in terms of the percent of people aged 65-74 who had never been on the internet, with Austria at 76% and Ireland at 78%. By 2018, in Austria this has reduced to 40%, while Ireland lags at 55%.

³ Central Statistics Office (2018) *Information Society Statistics - Households 2018*. Available at <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/isslh/information societystatistics-households2018/>

⁴ Eurostat 2018 figures. Available at <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/digital-economy-and-society/data/database>

⁵ See <https://www.idaireland.com/doing-business-here/industry-sectors/software>

**Table 1: Differences over time in countries with similar starting points in 2009:
Percentage of people aged 65-74 who have never used the internet, 2009-2018**

	Ireland	Estonia	Czechia	Austria	France
2009	78	84	82	76	69
2018	55	34	37	40	27

Source: Eurostat

Current figures on people aged 65-74 in Ireland who use the internet infrequently or never, and the digital skills of this group, are also stark in relation to our international peers.

Table 2: Current users: Internet use among people aged between 65 and 74, 2018

Percentage of people aged 65-74 who:	Ireland	Britain	Denmark	Finland	EU28
Used the internet within last 12 months	45	82	92	79	58
Never used the internet	55	16	6	18	37

Source: Eurostat

Table 3: Digital skill levels among people aged between 65 and 74 (2017)

Percentage of people aged 65-74 who:	Ireland	Britain	Denmark	Finland	EU28
Have basic or above basic overall digital skills⁶	17	42	42	40	25

Source: Eurostat

Combining best available figures from the above Eurostat data, Census 2016 statistics and the National Digital Strategy 2013, estimate that only 3% of people aged 75 and over use the

⁶ Eurostat 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; Email; Online government services; Online banking services; Use of "Apps", Using social media including skype, Online shopping. See [https://www.dccae.gov.ie/documents/Digital%20Skills%20for%20Citizens%20-%20NEW%20\[branding\]%20LEAFLET.pdf](https://www.dccae.gov.ie/documents/Digital%20Skills%20for%20Citizens%20-%20NEW%20[branding]%20LEAFLET.pdf)

internet,⁷ we estimate that just over 488,000 older people in Ireland have never been online. This represents just over 70% of the total population over 65.⁸

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 avail of fewer services. Looking at the overall population, 74% of Irish internet users use it every day. Among those aged 60-74 who use the internet, the figure falls dramatically to only 33%.⁹

Eurostat data from 2018 indicates that 59% of Irish people made an online purchase in the previous 12 months, compared to only 18% among the 60-74 age group. This is a real limitation on the purchasing options of older people who collectively hold considerable purchasing power; the European Commission estimates that if the European Silver Economy (the economy of those aged over 50) was a nation, it would currently be the third largest economy in the world, valued at €3.7 trillion in 2015.¹⁰

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. The price of stamps has risen in the face of a 50% decline in transactional mail.¹¹ 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 leave older people unable to easily access financial services or lead to an older person handing control of their personal finances over to a digitally literate friend or relative.

⁷ Government of Ireland (2013) *National Digital Strategy 2013*. Available at <https://www.dccae.gov.ie/en-ie/communications/publications/Documents/63/National%20Digital%20Strategy%20July%202013%20compressed.pdf>

⁸ Eurostat and CSO figures. See

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/pme/populationandmigrationestimatesapril2019>

⁹ Central Statistics Office (2018) *Information Society Statistics - Households 2018*. Available at <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/isshh/information societystatistics-households2018>

¹⁰ European Commission (2018) *The Silver Economy*. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/silver-economy-study-how-stimulate-economy-hundreds-millions-euros-year>

¹¹ RTE (28 January 2019) 'Cost of international stamp to rise to €1.70'. Available at

<https://www.rte.ie/news/business/2019/0128/1026037-an-post-rate-increases/>

Government services now actively prefer transactions to be digital under a “Digital First” approach, encouraging people to carry out their tax returns, and 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, and the *Public Service ICT Strategy* prioritises the digitisation of ‘the main existing citizen and business transactional services across Public Services’.¹² Of people aged 60-74 who did not submit forms online to public authorities in Ireland in 2018, 18% said a lack of skills or knowledge was the reason, while 32% said another person did it on their behalf.¹³

In the context of this shift to digitisation of core services, it is critical to fund the upskilling of older people to engage with services, and to prevent the risk of financial abuse that lack of digital independence brings.

Another vital impact that results from a lack of digital literacy in older people is a reduced ability to participate in public policy development and consultation. Most Government consultation happens online, despite most over 65’s not being online: Of the 8 open consultations on nationwide public policy documents at time of writing in November 2019, only 1 offered public consultation workshops. This means that an estimated 300,000 over 65’s cannot easily contribute to the policy making processes that affect our lives.¹⁴

For example, despite an estimated 280,000 people never having been on the internet in rural Ireland, the 2019 consultation on the Action Plan for Rural Development held only two direct workshops.¹⁵ In the face of current information that over 70% of over 65’s are not able to access online consultations, urgent measures must be taken by Government to ensure people’s right to participate in the conduct of public affairs.¹⁶ This means both providing

¹² Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2015) *Public Service ICT Strategy*. Available at <https://ictstrategy.per.gov.ie/ictstrategy/digitalfirst.html>

¹³ Central Statistics Office (2018) *Information Society Statistics - Households 2018*. Available at <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/isslh/information societystatistics-households2018>

¹⁴ Using 2016 CSO population figures, using the assumption that the proportion of those that have never used the internet does not decrease after 75 years of age

¹⁵ Estimate based on 37% of the Irish population living in rural areas and 16% of the total Irish population never having accessed the internet. See Central Statistics Office (2017) *Press Statement Census 2016 Results Profile 2 - Population Distribution and Movements*. Available at <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2017pressreleases/presstatementcensus2016resultsprofile2-populationdistributionandmovements/> and Central Statistics Office (2018) *Information Society Statistics - Households 2018*. Available at <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/isslh/information societystatistics-households2018>

¹⁶ The Carter Centre (2017) *The Right To Participate In Public Affairs, Submission on the Draft Guidelines*. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/EqualParticipation/DraftGuidelines/CarterCenter.pdf>

better funding for comprehensive digital literacy training, and standardising easily accessible offline consultation processes.

The personal safety consequences of Government reliance on online communications are a real concern particularly in emergency situations. This was very visible during Storm Emma in March 2018 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 navigate 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. It makes international phone calls far more expensive. It also makes it difficult to find cheaper products and better deals on services such as utilities and phone, as the comparison and sourcing process is much more difficult offline and often simply not available.

Crucially, the ability to competently navigate the internet can have a huge impact on independence for the many older people who have mobility issues. One in five people over 60 in Ireland has a disability,¹⁷ and internet skills can make all the difference in maintaining ease of daily activities such as shopping for groceries and other items, accessing information, maintaining social connections and engaging with arts and culture. In addition, in the context of the rise of 'eHealth'¹⁸ and the potential of telehealthcare and e-prescribing to better manage chronic conditions at lower cost, upskilling individuals to work confidently in the digital sphere has real consequences for independence and quality healthcare access.

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, save money, purchase a wider range of goods, and keep in touch with family and friends.

Use of the internet has the proven potential to deliver positive social and health related outcomes for older people, not least decreased feelings of loneliness and isolation.¹⁹ The

¹⁷ Central Statistics Office (2017) Census of Population 2016 Profile 9 Health, Disability and Carers. Available at <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp9hdc/p8hdc/p9d>

¹⁸ Department of Health (2013) *eHealth Strategy for Ireland*. Available at <https://www.ehealthireland.ie/Knowledge-Information-Plan/eHealth-Strategy-for-Ireland.pdf>

¹⁹ A 2016 study by the Institute of Public Health found that 10% 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

Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) found more than 37% of people aged 50 and over reported feeling lonely some or all of the time. A 2014 American study found that regular use of the internet was found to reduce depression by a third and was most pronounced among older people living alone:

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

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, build support groups around medical issues, and create blogs and videos to capture local history. One of Age Action’s Silver Surfer award winners, Margaret Byrne, maintains a craft blog, provides online tutorials, and shares knitting patterns online, as well as co-founding an online support group for survivors of mesh implant complications, and actively campaigning on the issue.

Voices of older people²¹

“It has given me a new lease of life. I feel so involved now, I used to feel so isolated and never knew what people were talking about regarding Internet, email etc. This has been a light in a black tunnel for me. The joy I feel being able to use my tablet (that I had been given 3 years ago and never actually used it before) is indescribable. I feel connected with the world again and it brings me great joy.”

Bridget, Cork

“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

“I am more confident and gained a lot of new information about the internet. I am more confident using google maps and feel less isolated. I can now contact friends and family more easily which saves me money. It has broadened my recipes at home, which I enjoy.”

Margaret, Dublin

“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

²⁰ Cotten et al, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, Volume 69, Issue 5, 1 September 2014, Pages 763-771

²¹ Throughout the paper names changed to protect the identity of the older person. Taken from older people who were learners or tutors in Age Action’s Getting Started Programme and nominees for the Silver Surfer Awards.

Barriers to getting online

There are a number of barriers preventing older people from getting, and staying, online. Overall, 30% of all households without internet access cited lack of skills as the reason.²² The next highest reason for not having internet access, a full 22 percentage points behind, at 8%, is because people have access to it elsewhere. This clearly shows the role of digital skills as the primary and most significant barrier to people getting online. This barrier is even more significant in older households. In households without internet access where all household members are over 60, 48% cite lack of skills as the reason. This points to the high level of need for digital literacy skills in older households.

Beyond skills, older people can experience a range of other barriers to getting 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 communities²³ and therefore to be among the hundreds of thousands of homes waiting for broadband coverage under the National Broadband Plan. 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.²⁴ Ageism can also have a detrimental impact on how an older person perceives their own ability to learn.²⁵ 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, learners are as able to master online technologies as anyone else.

Voices of Older People

"It gave me so much confidence that I am no longer afraid of the computer and that is a huge thing for me."

²² Central Statistics Office (2018) *Information Society Statistics - Households 2018*. Available at <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/issbh/information societystatistics-households2018/>

²³ Department of Rural and Community Development (2018) *Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development*. Available at <https://assets.gov.ie/2715/131118093828-a9da81a7a12b4f85aad3260c4f4bd80c.pdf>

²⁴ 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

²⁵ 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. Available at <http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/800/904>.

Norah, Cork

“I had one to one training, this reduced my fear of technology as my tutor took time to explain steps to me and helped me slow down my panic.”

Peter, Dublin

Government’s response

Over the past 10 years, the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment has funded one-off digital literacy training for an estimated 210,000 people.²⁶ Most recently this has been through the Digital Skills for Citizens Grant Scheme (DSCGS). The training under this scheme is well-pitched, being open only to those who have never used the internet, and targeted at “people over 45, farming communities, small business owners, the unemployed, persons with disabilities and disadvantaged groups”.²⁷ The DSCGS is currently halted while under review, with no public plans to continue to address this need. While Ireland has invested in these programmes for the last 10 years, rates of digital literacy that are persistently far behind our EU neighbours suggests that additional supports are urgently required, not a halt in funding with no public plan for further investment.

Training through the DSCGS has been successful in addressing a part of the need for digital skills training by encouraging older people to get online. However, achieving the widespread, long-term outcome of digital independence for older people in daily life requires increased investment in the scale and type of training provided. Specifically, a focus on skills consolidation, learner needs, better access, technical support, and broader core training to promote independence is paramount.

Consolidation of skills is essential to embed learning. How many of us learnt to drive confidently in a small number of lessons? Learning to use the internet could be considered to involve an equally complex range of tools to master from scratch. There is currently no funding for further time to allow an older person to cement learning and to build up their confidence. This can be especially important when a period of ill health or caring responsibilities means that a substantial amount of time passes between classes. Promoting skill retention through funding time to practice and reinforce knowledge offers the best value

²⁶ See Response to Parliamentary Question 9078/17 on 22 February 2017 and Government of Ireland (2019) *Budget 2020 Expenditure Report*. Available at [http://budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2020/Documents/Budget/Parts%20I-III%20Expenditure%20Report%202020%20\(B\).pdf](http://budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2020/Documents/Budget/Parts%20I-III%20Expenditure%20Report%202020%20(B).pdf)

²⁷ See [https://dcaae.gov.ie/documents/Digital%20Skills%20for%20Citizens%20-%20NEW%20\[branding\]%20LEAFLET.pdf](https://dcaae.gov.ie/documents/Digital%20Skills%20for%20Citizens%20-%20NEW%20[branding]%20LEAFLET.pdf)

for money from the Government's investment in digital training. It also provides an important foundation for follow-on learning when new devices or software updates are introduced.

Addressing the needs of older learners must also be part of the training programme structure. Many older learners may be nervous returning to a classroom style environment or have had negative historical experiences with education that make a larger classroom with one tutor an unattractive prospect. In addition, it is estimated that 5-20% of people over 65 have a mild cognitive impairment.²⁸ One-to-one learning is often needed to allow 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. Organisations funded under the DSCGS have been required to provide training to classes of 'no more than ten people', with no incentive or support for organisations to deliver the classes in a one-to-one setting in order to achieve better outcomes. Feedback suggests that learners find the one-to-one tutor/student ratio is the most attractive and encouraging aspect of Age Action's digital literacy training.

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

Ensuring access to training for older people also requires funding support that allows for people to be trained in their own home where this is needed, given that 20% of over 60's have a disability²⁹ some have carer responsibilities and most are on fixed incomes that can limit travel options, particularly in rural areas.

Basic training in how to use a computer or device is needed before someone can confidently participate in digital literacy classes and funding is required for time to explain to learners how to use digital devices. The Government's DSCGS is targeted at people who have never used the internet but does not currently provide for training in the basics of using the device

²⁸ Alzheimer's Society UK (2015) *What is Mild Cognitive Impairment?* Available at <https://www.understandtogether.ie/Training-resources/Helpful-Resources/Understand-Together-Resources/What-is-mild-cognitive-impairment-MCI-.pdf>

²⁹ Central Statistics Office (2017) *Census of Population 2016 Profile 9 Health, Disability and Carers*. Available at <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp9hdc/p8hdc/p9d/>

such as how to use a mouse and keyboard, turning devices on and off, and changing screen text size. This is a major oversight given that those who have never used the internet are much more likely to also have never used a computer or other internet-enabled device.

“I had never even switched on a computer before in my life. Now I can turn on the laptop and access the internet where I can access lots of information which would have been completely inaccessible before. I would like to do more lessons...as given I was a complete beginner, there was a lot to take in, even learning to use a mouse took time.

Daniel, Mullingar

Government-funded digital training needs to aim to provide older people with a full set of digital skills to enable independence, cultural and political involvement, and wellbeing through engagement. To do this, the scope of the core skillset for training should expand to include topics such as safe online banking, a broader range of Government services, participation in public consultation including surveys, shopping online, health services, new smart technologies to support independent living, and accessing video/tv/radio.

Digital hardware and software support is an aspect that is often forgotten but is vital to help older people achieve regular internet engagement. 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. Online technology adapts and grows at a fast pace, with technologies regularly becoming obsolete and new skills required. This creates a need for ongoing technical support and ongoing learning. 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 freephone helpline and home visits for people with mobility difficulties.³⁰

Next Steps

Older people in Ireland must be empowered and enabled to be fully-fledged digital citizens, to use the internet to maintain their independence, claim their right to participate in public policy development, access information and services, manage their financial affairs, communicate with friends and family, pursue education opportunities and do their business online.

³⁰ <https://www.abilitynet.org.uk>

Successive Governments have invested in programmes to assist older people to get online. However, the current stark gap between internet use by older people in Ireland and by our EU neighbours shows that these measures have not been enough.

Additional resources to provide and improve services for older people to become digitally literate and stay safe online are urgently needed. We must also identify new, innovative, ways to assist the many older people who are not yet proficient internet users.³¹

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment

1. Reform the Digital Skills for Citizens Grant Scheme to provide sufficient funds and financial incentives to digital literacy training organisations to:
 - a. provide one-to-one training
 - b. enable training in basic mouse, keyboard and computer use where necessary
 - c. allow learners to access more than 10 hours of training to build confidence and consolidate learning
 - d. provide training in the older person's home where this is necessary
 - e. provide technical support e.g. installing new devices, diagnosing malfunctions
 - f. include time for training in safe online banking, a broader range of Government services, shopping online, health services, smart technologies to support independent living and video/tv/radio as core, compulsory aspects of the training
2. Undertake a cost estimate to establish the necessary funding required to support the above outcomes-focused training, including coverage in rural Ireland, and a free phone helpline.
3. Develop and roll-out an ongoing national digital skills learning programme, integrating new digital hubs in towns with existing community infrastructure and consider looking to the Online Centres Network and AbilityNet in Britain as potential future models.

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

1. Develop a standardised model for public participation to meet the needs of those offline e.g. to be facilitated through An Post as part of their current role in facilitating access to government services.

³¹ In 2017, 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.

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