

## **The Digital Divide and Impact of Covid**

### Introduction

Digital divide is a term that refers to the gap between demographics and regions that have access to modern information and communications technology, and those that don't or have restricted access. This technology can include the telephone, television, computers and the Internet. This report looks at the impact of the digital divide in East Herts and how we can work together to reduce it.

### Background

The ONS digital divide report tells us that in 2018 10% of the adult UK population were "internet non-users" (i.e they have never used the internet or have not used it in the last three months). We have been tracking digital access and skills amongst our clients since 2015. Our most recent (2020) survey shows that over 1 in 5 surveyed do not use the internet. Of these, 40% said that they did not know how to use the internet and 40% that they had no access to it. Our recent experience in supporting people with digital Universal Credit claims reinforces this and suggests that digital literacy and access is low for many. Our research, and that of local partners, also shows that not using the internet continues to be age related, with the majority of non-users being aged 60+.

A 2018 Age UK report found that 36% (4.2 million) people aged 65+ were offline, meaning they haven't used technology in a long time or have never used it. Age UK also found that over 79% of all digital exclusion is among those aged 65 and over. In a world where technology progresses at an exponential rate, older adults are often unaware of how many different technologies exist, and how these can help them.

### The impact of Covid

In recent months we have seen a huge increase in digital interaction, with 7 in 10 people making at least one video call a week, including growing numbers of older people. Digital technology has been a lifeline for many during lockdown (Campaign to End Loneliness). However, despite the growth in online use people aged over 65 are less likely (48%) to do their shopping online compared to the national average (78%), look for health information (30% vs 54%) or access online banking (35% vs 69%) (Ageing Better). This means that a large percentage of the population are missing out on the savings and ease that comes with digital technology. Social academics have noted the potentially negative impacts of moving so much of the healthcare system online to support social distancing, including appointments and booking flu jabs.

A report by The National Lottery Community Fund on bridging the digital divide found that those who need the most support, for example those with disabilities or over 70, are less likely to have digital access, putting them at a greater risk during this time of isolation. Moreover, social gatherings such as workout groups, book clubs, and pub quizzes are all being moved online to keep to government guidelines, leaving some excluded.

Further analysis was done in October 2020 as part of the Social Connection Survey to understand how rural East Herts residents are currently using technology, especially during lockdown. 290 people participated in the survey, with a mean age of 66. 7% of participants only had access to a home telephone and had no access to internet or email. Those who had internet access mostly used it for ordering food shopping or other items and receiving neighbourhood watch alerts.

Further research by Citizens Advice Research & Campaigns Lancashire Cluster group in their Digital Participation Research Report (December 2019) found that the digital divide could affect multiple areas including: full participation in society; access to everyday services including healthcare; basic entitlements such as benefits; maintaining independence. 58% of those who reported a disability or long-term health condition had no internet access at home.

*This client is one of the thousands of benefit applicants who does not have his own access to the internet, nor any computer use experience or literacy. He was entirely reliant on a family member to make the online Universal Credit application and will continue to be entirely reliant on him for the ongoing management of his claim, his payments, his financial info, etc (Adviser)*

## Conclusion

Our research suggests that the majority of our clients can get high quality advice using phone and digital channels. For many this is a better service than face to face as it offers more flexibility and greater access. We want our future service to be able to serve these clients efficiently so that we can focus more of our resources on those clients who, for whatever reason, cannot be helped by phone or digital. For these clients we want to provide a personalised service – in a way, location and time to suit them. This could be in-person face to face at a range of locations or even a home visit. We will continue to work with partners to address the impact of the digital divide in East Herts, most notably through our rural outreach.

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