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Online only! Residents struggle to access council services

A charity is calling for urgent action to address "the profound challenges of digital exclusion" suffered by older people following research which found many councils do not offer alternatives to the internet to access services.

Access denied: accessing council services without the internet* an Age UK London report was produced after sending Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to all 33 London boroughs: 29 replied. Many London authorities admitted neither offering a way to access services offline, nor any support.

It says: "There is a cause for concern for those who do not use digital technology and as a result can feel they are being left behind or excluded from society."
The FOI request asked how residents could apply for Housing Benefits, Council Tax Rebate, Council Tax Discounts and Blue Badges; whether they provided face-to-face assistance, and where those without online access could find telephone contact details to departments for information and help.

Several boroughs said it was possible to apply offline using a paper form but the first step in this process was downloading an application form from their website requiring access to a printer. Almost a third did not offer a way to apply for council tax reductions or housing benefit offline. A quarter did not offer offline support to apply for a Blue Badge.

Responses were tested by sending mystery shoppers to the 12 local authorities who had claimed they also offered offline in-person support to accessing services. Over half reported a negative experience including long telephone waits.

Research by the charity in 2021 found there were more than 200,000 Londoners over the age of 75 who do not use the internet at all.

Its *Mind the Digital Gap* campaign calls for decision makers and public service providers to not exclude those who cannot or choose not to use the internet, and action to tackle barriers that prevent older Londoners who want to get online from doing so.

The Report is available at
* https://www.ageuk.org.uk/london/
Jenny Sims

Jenny Sims
Chair, Digital Working Party
EDITORIAL

Hello and welcome to Issue 4 of our *Connections for All* newsletter. Its design and content are still a work in progress for the editorial team, and will evolve in response to readers' feedback. So thanks to you, we have started a Letters page. And thanks to Luke Howard, a member of the Digital Working Party and a TSSA member concerned about the effect planned closure of rail ticket officers will have on people unable to book online, we are launching an occasional Opinion column.

But booking tickets online is not always simple - even if it seems easy, as David Luxton, another working party member, describes in his saga about buying a Thames boat ticket.

Pensioners are being left isolated by the drive to put everything online (News in Brief), but the government's NHS' digitisation drive is not on track.

Local government too, is striving to make everything digital, and in doing so is often failing to offer alternative ways of accessing services for those who do not wish to or cannot go online, as the Age UK London report, *Access Denied* reveals (p.1).

Affordability is one of the barriers to going online, and Digital Poverty Action has pledged to end digital poverty by 2030.

February marked the 2nd anniversary of the *NPC's Connections* for All campaign – which hasn't pledged an end date. But hopefully, many of the NPC' goals concerning digital inclusion and exclusion will be met long before 2030 – including the appointment of an Older People's Commissioner for England!

OPINION
It's not all about pay!

Too little media coverage of the current rail disputes has been given to the effect the planned closure of ticket offices will have on older people, particularly those unable to book tickets online. Too much attention has been focussed on pay.

Employers and the Government are keen that disputes are presented as just about pay, but other issues are part of the debate. Some of these are primarily staff concerns, but far-reaching. For example, rostering Sunday working as part of the standard working week will have at best a marginal impact on the reliability of Sunday services but be disastrous for staff with family responsibilities.

Other changes will directly hit passenger services, and raise concern about accessibility and digital exclusion. We know that pensioners value the opportunity to buy tickets face-to-face even more than the public at large do.

Even so, the Government has been pressing rail operators to implement plans to close all, or almost all, ticket offices, leaving passengers dependent on ticket machines and internet purchases.

Even with the promised simplification of ticket products, this will remove an important human interaction and make many elderly and disabled people reluctant to use the railways - when we know that the survival of the planet depends on getting people out of their cars and into public transport.

Yes, the rail unions are fighting to improve their members' pay, and defend their working conditions - but they are also fighting against changes that will make using the railways a less human, and less pleasant, activity, and they deserve all of our support in this.

Luke Howard
TSSA and NPC Digital Working Party member

Coping with digital tickets – a warning!

Booking tickets for train travel, a concert or other event is not as straightforward as it used to be. There is now the assumption that you have a smart phone or other digital device to go online to book your ticket; and that you have a debit or credit card (not cash) to pay for your ticket.

Once you`ve done that, then you are asked to download a barcode that can then be scanned at the ticket barrier or by staff at the event. This paperless and cashless process is meant to make life easier, but that is not always the case, as I recently found to my cost – and which left me feeling like I`d been scammed by Transport for London (TfL) !

I had decided to take a scheduled service river boat, rather than the tube, from the Tower of London to the Globe Theatre, a short trip up the river Thames. I booked a single clipper boat ticket on my mobile phone for £3.80 (with my pensioner discount) and downloaded a barcode for the ticket onto my mobile.

When I was getting on the boat we were told to "tap our tickets" on the machine as we walked on. I did this and of course didn`t need to tap out at the other end as I had a pre-booked ticket. But then the next day Tfl took **£26** out of my account because the machine had scanned the debit card on my phone rather than the pre-booked ticket and applied the maximum fare as I hadn`t tapped the same card getting off the boat! So one small error as I boarded cost me £26.

I appealed to TfL for a refund but despite repeated email exchanges no refund was given as my debit card was not registered on their system - even though I proved I had a pre-paid ticket for the journey! Just a warning to be careful when using contactless technology!
David Luxton, Deputy General Secretary, Civil Service Pensioners` Alliance (CSPA)

NHS digitisation not on track

Progress on the digitisation of the NHS in England has been found to be "too slow" and "inadequate" by the Government's Health and Social Care, Committee's independent Expert Panel, including the digital literacy of the workforce.

Just one commitment is on track in the digital policy area: By 2024, 75% of adults will have registered for the NHS App with 68% (over 30 million people) having done so by March 2023.

The Committee's inquiry into the current use of digital technology in health and social care and how it needs to change to deliver an improvement in services and outcomes for patients is ongoing.
It is also looking at how to prevent digital health inequalities and inform patients of the potential benefits of digital approaches to healthcare.

The Panel's report* evaluates progress against pledges made by the Government in the area of digitisation of the NHS across four policy areas: the care of patients and people in receipt of social care; the health of the population; the cost and efficiency of care; and the digital literacy of the workforce and the digital workforce .

The Panel said: "Although we recognise the significant progress made in the area of digitisation in the health and care system, we conclude that some key commitments have not been met or are not on track to be met. Much of the evidence we heard indicated that progress towards national standards and frameworks within the NHS is happening but is too slow overall."*Evaluation of Government commitments made on the digitisation of the NHS*
https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmhealth/780/report.html

LETTERS FROM MEMBERS

Access denied

I find the Age UK London report and recommendations to be very relevant. Whilst I am fairly competent in the use of the internet I will still refuse to do things like internet banking. Living in a London age-friendly borough, I am still told that I have to pay my council tax online etc. I simply write out a cheque, which strangely gets cashed. When we were told we were entitled to a £50 discount off the council tax, I said "Please send me a cheque or take it off next year's bill". They said "No we cannot do that". A month later I was contacted and told they would take it off my bill. I do these things in order to try and ensure that older people are not excluded from doing the basic things in life.
Barry Todman, Secretary, NPC London Region

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Computer skills teaching

From 1986 I taught office computing short courses including: spreadsheets, databases and screen presentations for adult part-time students at London Further Education (FE) colleges.
From 2004 to 2012 I taught for Tottenham FE Trades Union Studies Department, going to workplaces including BT Ilford and the Post Office's Mount Pleasant sorting office.
I am concerned about the lack of government (national and local) funding which is needed for digital skills' training for older people.
Many people using computers find FE part-time courses ideal for regularly updating their computing skills during evenings or weekends, three to six hours weekly for three months.
FE college prices are very reasonable compared with private business colleges. And as firms upgrade software, so FE colleges keep pace.
Small/local scale research and development projects can be carried out at FE colleges, which pensioners can participate in and provide useful insights in the testing of products.

M Newland, London.

Online hassle

I have found it to be impossible to obtain the terms and conditions applied by British Gas in paper format. The staff appear unable to understand the enquiry, but ask me to identify individual websites which are included as an automatic response in correspondence.
A severe hearing loss makes using the telephone problematic.
As an aside, I am curious to know why a large print bill needs to take up ten A4 pages while not providing the information included in the standard version of a bill.
There is also a problem in not having a smart phone, as organisations are demanding a third layer of security which requires the customer to receive a code via smart phone to be able to access the account. Currently, if I want to order an item via the internet I have to telephone my bank to have the transaction authorised.
Naturally I am not buying much, but I would like to know why the customer needs to protect the organisation, rather than those earning a living from the customer protecting their customers. They are far better placed to do so.
I hope your efforts, in combination with others protesting the exclusion of so many people who find it difficult to use the internet, will cause these organisations to reconsider.
I realise it is difficult when businesses in general are becoming more aggressive in the means used to ignore Consumer Rights, Contract Law and so on, while Government simply says, "It is a business decision." "There is nothing we can do."
I hope these comments will add to those of others to urge better inclusion for those who are not able to do what is now required.
Mrs A Walsh. South East Region.

Online Safety Bill: Legal but Harmful?

Violet Rook, Digital Working Party member, reports on a Centre for Policy Studies webinar, 9th February

Five speakers gave their views about the Online Safety Bill currently going through parliament: Matthew Feeney, Head of Technology and Innovation - Centre for Policy Studies (Chair); Matthew Hodgson, Technical Co-Founder – Matrix, a technology company which deals with many national and international software companies; Dr Edina Harbinja, Senior Lecturer in Media/Privacy Law - Aston Law School; Baroness Kidron, Member of the Draft Online Safety Bill Committee, and Will Moy, CEO - Full Fact, an organisation concerned with freedom online in regard to the Human Rights Act.

While its proponents view the Bill as necessary to ensure the safety of adults and children online, others argue that it presents a threat to free speech, competition, innovation and privacy. What is the scope of state responsibility on these matters? How to strike the balance between censorship and free speech? How will the Bill impact the UK tech sector? These were the questions discussed

Speakers agreed on the need for the Bill but suggested there may be points which should be considered which could make it more effective and other points which might lead to harm via unintentional consequences.

For example, the CEO of Matrix stressed the need to maintain two-sector authorization, whereby a code is sent to a nominated phone number to check the identity of a person. Such methods strengthen security for the individual online and the need for protection against scammers. Those present agreed strongly. Dr. Harbinja also provided some legal precedence to clauses in the Bill which she maintained could prove to be interpreted loosely by the big internet providers on occasion.

Will Moy was concerned about the individual freedoms of the internet and human rights which could be regulated to such an extent that might involve spying on the individual.

Baroness Kidman expressed concern about the methods involved to regulate social media, and also about the recent suicide case of teenager Molly Russell.* She said with the latest version of the Online Safety Bill, service providers, will, at last, be required to protect users, but she hoped it would go further. The need for Ofcom to have more regulations to monitor online providers in regard to adults and children on social media and for those powers to be updated regularly and for there to be a law structure which caters for online development was also made clear.

There was a general consensus of great concern which they had all stressed when speaking at a consultation on the Bill. *(The coroner's verdict said: "Molly Russell died of an act of self-harm whilst suffering from depression and the negative effects of online content).*

Get help online

Independent Age writes:

"Take some steps to protect yourself and learn a few simple solutions for problems. For free help visit our webpage **Getting technology support Independent Age.** We have partnered with Vodafone to help older people become more confident online. **Hi Digital** is a free online course which consists of bite-size lessons. The basics of internet access, connecting with others via email, social media and WhatsApp, researching activities and hobbies also shopping and paying for things online.
ADVICE via TELEPHONE freephone 0800 319 6789, There is also a **web chat** option on the website:**opening hours:** Monday to Friday: 9am-5pm "

Day to remember

Dignity Action Day, February 1st, marked one of the biggest national public sector protests in decades. It also marked the 2nd anniversary of the launch of NPC's digital inclusion campaign *Connections for All.*
Campaign newsletter February issue highlighted three key NPC campaigns: 1) An Older People's Commissioner for England 2) A National Care Service 3) True digital inclusion, as well as alternative strategies for those not online.
"There has never been a more pressing time for the implementation of these key changes that could make such a significant difference to the quality of all our lives – both young and old" said Jan Shortt, NPC General Secretary.

IPS instead of UPS scam

WHICH? the consumer publication warns: Fraudsters are impersonating the courier UPS to steal bank details from unsuspecting victims. **This scam involves fraudsters sending out "missed delivery" emails that include UPS branding, albeit with one subtle difference. Impersonating delivery companies is a common tactic used by scammers. Press control + click on:** Find out how this scam works, and get free advice on how to report a dodgy email.

Lessons from Leeds

Leeds city-wide digital inclusion project has proved so successful it is being promoted as a model and template other local authorities. Read more about *100% Digital Leeds* here: A community-based approach to digital inclusion | Digital Inclusion Toolkit (digitalinclusionkit.org)

Left isolated

Pensioners are being left isolated by the drive to put online everything, everywhere, all at once, the *Paul Waugh on Politics* column in the i online newspaper confirmed.
"With banks closing cashpoints and some ticket office vending machines and shops becoming card-only, those pensioners who rely on cash are getting slowly squeezed out of daily activities many take for granted."
bit.ly/407MSw2

On the case

After NPC Wales alerted the Older People's Commissioner for Wales to an example of Welsh Government digital exclusion, her office followed up with those responsible to point out applications for the Fuel Support Scheme 2022/23 could only be made online and no telephone number was available.
The OPC wrote to NPC Wales: "At OPCW, we'll continue to collect, monitor and challenge examples of digital exclusion like the one you've raised here. We're thinking about how best to follow up our existing work on this."

Shame on them!

A UK government leaflet offering 'help for every household' is only online. No phone number given.
gov.uk/helpforhouseholds