



Citizens Advice Exeter Digital Exclusion Report March 2024

The extent and impact of digital exclusion in Exeter- a study

Executive summary

Banking, healthcare, travel, education, job applications, the benefits system and many other public services are increasingly online. At Citizens Advice Exeter ('CAE') we often see clients who are struggling to cope with these online services whilst not having the equipment, skills or confidence to do so. People who are digitally excluded cannot participate fully in society and often suffer added hardship as a result; they deserve alternative ways to access these services. CAE staff and volunteers undertook a survey of 153 people at various locations across the city to gain an insight into the impact of increased digitization on the people in Exeter.

Introduction

Although there is no universally accepted definition of digital exclusion, it generally refers to "sections of the population not being able to use the internet in ways that are needed to participate fully in modern society" (House of Lords Communications & Digital Committee 2023 Ref 1.) This report shows that:

- 1.7 million households have no internet, many having given up their internet because of the rising cost of living.
- Around 2.4 million people are unable to complete a single basic task online such as opening an internet browser.
- Around 5 million employed adults cannot complete essential digital works tasks.

The report suggests that digital skills are likely to become the UK's largest skill gap by 2030.

Digital exclusion is linked to wider inequalities in society and is more likely to be faced by people on low incomes, people aged over 65 years and people with disability. The period of lockdowns due to the Covid 19 pandemic further exacerbated the division between families with access, and families without access to the internet. With the continued cost of living crisis this situation is unlikely to have improved.

In Summer and Autumn 2023 CAE devised a short questionnaire about access to, and use of the internet to gather evidence of people's experience of increased digitization and their ability to use online services. The surveys were conducted through phone calls to randomly selected CAE clients, and with the general public face to face at festivals and at locations such as the Exeter central library. Our findings are presented below.

Conversations with respondents revealed a broad range of responses to digital services and the internet in general:

- 15% of respondents said that they did not have access to the internet at home.
- Barriers to becoming a confident IT user included cost, lack of skill, fear of scams, physical impairment, and lack of confidence.
- 86% of our respondents thought it important that all Exeter residents should have access to digital services and the skills to use them.

Results

Access: over 14% of respondents have no access to the internet at home, so even if they do have the skills to use the internet, they must mainly rely on digital sources outside the home such as public libraries. Reasons for people having no access are varied:

The knowledge and skills to set themselves up with broadband: where people have no background knowledge of how the internet works or know anyone with those skills who can help them, it is challenging both to get started and to sort out problems as they arise.

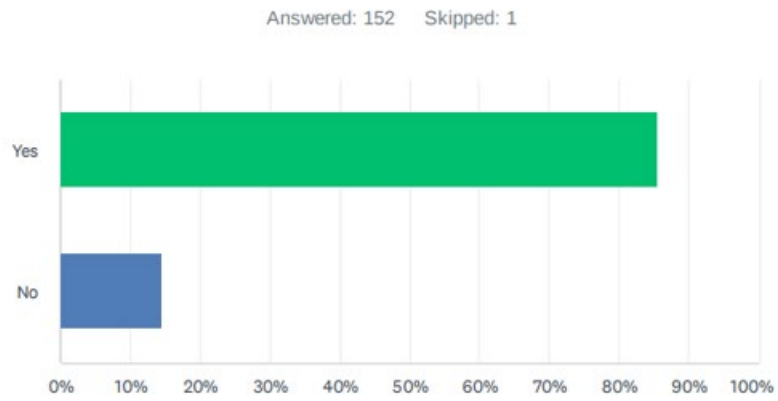
Costs: the set up and ongoing costs of subscribing to an internet provider, and the costs of hardware such as a laptop, may be prohibitive.

Understanding IT terminology: knowing what you need for starting up and continuing internet access.

The need to live in an area where there is internet access: some parts of the country, including some areas of Devon, are inaccessible to the internet.

Overcoming psychological barriers: people believing they have or can acquire the necessary skills.

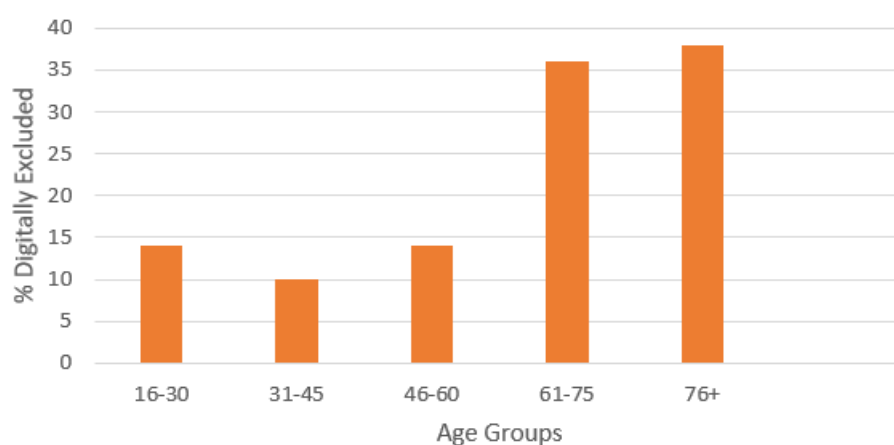
Do you have personal access to broadband or mobile internet?



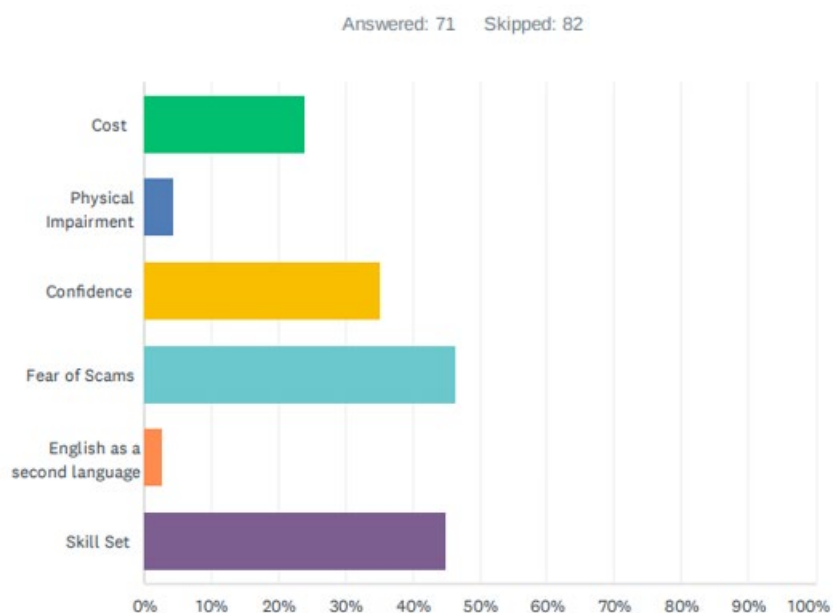
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	85.53%	130
No	14.47%	22
Total Respondents: 152		

Age group: When the data is sorted according to age group, the percentage of each digitally excluded group is greatest amongst people who are over 60 years of age. Many of this section of society will not have had the opportunity to learn digital skills at the time of their full-time education, and later not had the encouragement or skills to learn later in life. There are a surprising number of younger people who are also digitally excluded. There will always be certain sections of society who will never be able to acquire the requisite skills and knowledge to become digitally skilled, for example, those people with various kinds of mental and physical disability. The inability to access the internet, particularly in the older age groups, can lead to social isolation due to lack of contact with their families and failure to make bookings for activities outside the home. However, some younger people too, do not have access because their family cannot afford the cost, because they missed out on learning the appropriate skills whilst at school, or because some people live off grid. Nowadays the internet is required for researching information for homework and children are often required to present homework online. In homes where this is not possible, children are disadvantaged from an early age.

Digital exclusion by age group



Have you encountered any barriers to becoming a confident digital user? If so, what were they?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Cost	23.94%	17
Physical Impairment	4.23%	3
Confidence	35.21%	25

Barriers encountered: Fear of scams and lack of the required skill set are the two most cited barriers to using the internet, followed by lack of confidence and cost.

For some younger people, cost is the barrier to their internet access so that college studies and homework must be done in the library. In the older group of responders, we heard that learning to use IT and having the internet was not an option they felt able to tackle and that the reliance on services provided only online made them feel excluded and lonely.

One resident in her nineties who we met in the library told us that she could no longer go to concerts which were a lifeline for her because booking by phone was no longer an option.

One respondent who works with people of all ages who have learning difficulties made the point that there are some people who will never be able to use the internet but who can use a phone.

A rush to remove the phone option for services, already a factor in many instances, effectively excludes those people from using the service. Organisations could make their

services and web sites more user friendly, to encourage people to try to use online access rather than rely on the phone lines.

We call on government to show political leadership by developing a long-term strategy to ensure digital inclusion for all people who have the potential to use it, and in all areas of the country, especially zones where currently there is poor reception. We also identify the need to provide more training opportunities and digital access points. We urge that service providers continue to provide face to face and telephone access so that people who cannot use the internet, for whatever reason, are not excluded.

Appendix A – list of comments from respondents

Appendix B – the questionnaire

Appendix C – digital resources in Exeter

References

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5803/ldselect/ldcomm/219/21902.htm>

This report was produced by the Citizens Advice Exeter Research and Campaigns team. We would like to thank Exeter residents, our staff and volunteers for their contributions and support in writing this report.

If you would like to know more about our Research and Campaigning work please do get in touch by emailing us at: researchandcampaign@citizensadviceexeter.org.uk

Appendix A

The Digital Divide Summary of comments

Res = Respondent

Lack of skills:

Res would like to improve her IT skills but has no one to help her.

Res would like to improve her skills but cannot afford to pay for a course.

Res feels excluded from services and would like to have training but knows of none that is available.

Lack of basic training to give people the skills to use the internet.

Res had no need to use the internet when she was younger as she didn't need it for her job as a carer.

Organisations should make their online services more user friendly to make it easier for people who have poor skills.

Older Res believes it's important for young people to use the internet but doesn't see so much need for older people to do so.

Res expressed concern for elderly people who cannot use the internet to access services.

No interest in using the internet:

Res has no interest in learning to use the internet. Where no phone number is given, the Res writes a letter and has no problem with this. Res recognised that IT skills are important though.

Some Res' do not recognise the importance of IT skills or are lukewarm about it.

Res' say they prefer to speak to someone on the phone rather than making contact online as they like to ask questions, and the experience feels less threatening.

Res doesn't think it's necessary to use the internet, that everyone should make contact by phone. Res has a negative view of young people who are "on their phones all the time, they forget how to communicate, to make conversation".

FAQ on websites often do not have answers to the questions people want to ask so Res prefers to use the phone.

Terminology:

Res thought the use of the internet is only via a laptop and does not consider online banking on a phone as use of the internet. When asked, he said he doesn't use the internet but as the survey progressed, he said he does his banking on his phone. Terminology may be a barrier to people trying to use the internet and learning a whole new set of words and concepts.

Costs of accessing the internet:

Costs involved in setting up and using the internet – phone, laptop, internet provider, security software.

Assistance to use the internet:

Many Res' rely on family and friends to help them access anything they need on the internet or perform the access/actions for them.

Res relies on her carer for 'coaching' in the use of the internet.

Res only accesses the internet at the library.

Res said she goes to the library each day to access the internet and as a social event, to meet people there. The library staff helped her to buy a washing machine online.

Fear of using the internet:

Several Res' expressed concern about being scammed when using the internet, fear of identity theft and fraud.

Res was scammed via a phone call, so she is nervous of using the internet as she would have even less confidence in using that. She lost a lot of money and was not reimbursed.

Res who is dyslexic fears completing online forms online as they are afraid of giving incorrect information when having misread or misunderstood instructions.

Res says they have Snapchat and receive unwanted photos.

Difficulties people encounter when using the internet/technology and the impacts:

For a consultation on a medical issue, the Res had to complete an online form and upload a photo of her medical problem. The form was not in a format compatible with her laptop, so she phoned to request a paper form to complete; she then had to email a photo separately and hope the paper form and the emailed photo were matched up.

Res said being homeless and moving from one hostel to another makes regular internet use difficult or impossible.

Res is put off using the internet due to living in a rural area where connections are slow.

There were comments about people being marginalised due to lack of internet access. Even people who can use it to some extent, may get stuck and be unable progress with what they want to do.

Comments about railway ticket offices closing so purchasing train tickets is difficult; also, difficulty of paying by App in car parks either due to lack of skills or lack of a compatible phone. In addition, there were comments about having to keep apps updated for them to function.

Inadequate English language skills.

Children are often required to present homework online or that has been written on a computer. Increasingly, the internet is required to research information for homework. If the family doesn't have internet, this presents problems for the children and their opportunity to learn and keep up with other pupils. It is also a problem if the parents are not internet users themselves and cannot assist the children.

Res wanted to move money from one bank account to another, but she has no mobile phone, so she couldn't comply with the two-factor security whereby she would receive a text to her phone.

Some online forms and actions require an address to be provided such as when making purchases. Res said she makes up an address or uses that of a family member. She had recently returned from months/years of travelling and had no fixed address for herself.

Res is a midwife; she commented on the difficulties that arise when a patient cannot access the MyCare app for information about future appointments and other health related issues.

Elderly Res was awaiting a phone call from his GP but no call came through. After a couple of days, he spoke with his son who lives in London about this; his son diagnosed the problem as the settings on the Res's phone being inconsistent with receiving calls from unknown numbers. The son described how to change the settings and the Res then was able to receive the GP's calls. The impact was that GP was about to 'write off' his patient thinking the Res was simply not wanting/bothering to accept the call.

Young Res lives off grid and had no access to the internet, so she must go to the library or to college to do so; this is a considerable inconvenience for her studies and social life.

Res hates using the internet and finds it very frustrating not to be able to speak to an actual person in an organisation. She lives in a caravan with her autistic daughter and the daughter's service dog. Res says that help is slow and difficult to access because organisations are withdrawing communication involving human contact.

Elderly Res is becoming increasingly isolated as she is unable to book events online; sometimes that is the only way of booking, so she goes out less frequently.

With very many bank branches having closed, especially in rural areas, people must perform transactions online. It can be very difficult to speak to a person on the phone, or many hurdles need to be overcome before doing so.

Res tried to claim compensation for delays to train travel on GWR. She went online to complete the online application form, but it kept throwing her out. Res notified GWR via the messaging facility and tried to phone them, but the call only reached a recorded message. Finally, Res printed out an application form and posted it. It was an extremely frustrating experience and Res felt concerned for people without access to the internet to claim reimbursement of fares. It seems as if this organisation is purposely providing obstacles to customers speaking to their staff.

Appendix B

Inclusion or Exclusion – the drive to digital..... Survey 2023

So many things nowadays are going digital. At Citizens Advice Exeter we want to know how the public feel about this *drive to digital*do you feel included or excluded? Please can you tell us how you feel by answering a few questions?

Do you have personal access to broadband or mobile internet? Yes / No

If no, how do you access the internet if you need to? (record answer, continue overleaf if needed)

.....
.....

Do you have access to a printer if you need it yes / no?

Have you encountered any barriers to becoming a confident digital user? If so what were they? (circle as many as appropriate)

Cost Physical impairment Confidence
Fear of scams English as a second Language Skill Set
Other (anxiety etc.)

What device do you use to access the internet/the digital world? Please circle as appropriate.

Smartphone Tablet Mobile Phone (not smart)
Laptop/PC.....Other

What online services do you confidently access at home? Please circle as appropriate.

Online banking Health related services e.g. NHS, my Care
Online shopping Email
Dealing with Exeter Council Social media e.g. Facebook, Instagram
Dealing with other government dept Video calls e.g. Zoom, Teams

How important from 1 to 5 is it to you that everyone in the city has access to digital services, and the skills to use them?

1 being not important, 5 being very important 1 2 3 4 5

Would you mind telling us your age group?

16 – 30 31 – 45 46 – 60 61 – 75 76 + prefer not to say

We are of the view that many of us at some point, have felt ‘digitally excluded’ – are you, or have you? If so we would like to hear your story.....

Appendix C

Opportunities to develop digital skills

Age UK computer 1-1 – service starting soon –

<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/exeter/activities-and-events/activities-with-age-uk-exeter/computer-one-to-one/>

Private computer skills tutors - <https://www.superprof.co.uk/s/basic-computer,Exeter,50.722777,-3.531951,1.html>

Learn My Way – online courses on how to use the internet -

<https://www.learnmyway.com/>

Exeter College – essential digital skills - <https://ex-coll.ac.uk/course/essential-digital-skills/>

Free monthly basic tech workshops – Exeter library -

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/computer-say3953643027?aff=erelexpmlt>

Tech buddy sessions at Exeter library -

https://www.devonlibraries.org.uk/web/arena/events/-/asset_publisher/vvddswxha93m/content/tech-buddy-at-exeter-library-3/pop_up?_com_liferay_asset_publisher_web_portlet_AssetPublisherPortlet_INSTANCE_vvddswxha93m_viewMode=print&_com_liferay_asset_publisher_web_portlet_AssetPublisherPortlet_INSTANCE_vvddswxha93m_languageId=en_GB

IT drop in at Exeter library -

https://www.devonlibraries.org.uk/web/arena/events/-/asset_publisher/vvddswxha93m/content/its-yes-free-monthly-basic-tech-workshops-new-topic-each-month-tickets-69-drop-in-at-exeter-library-friday-session-_pop_up?_com_liferay_asset_publisher_web_portlet_AssetPublisherPortlet_INSTANCE_vvddswxha93m_viewMode=print&_com_liferay_asset_publisher_web_portlet_AssetPublisherPortlet_INSTANCE_vvddswxha93m_languageId=en_GB

Barclays digital wings - <https://digital.wings.uk.barclays/>

Cosmic - <https://www.cosmic.org.uk/digital-skills/individuals-communities>

Essential digital skills (Exmouth) -

<https://www.learndevon.co.uk/courses/course/essential-digital-skills-entry-level-3-10/>

Exeter connect -digital inclusion network -

<https://www.exeterconnect.org/digital-inclusion-network/>

Wellbeing Exeter – use lots of different resources (for example Learn Devon and Devon Connect) to offer digital skills courses

<https://www.wellbeingexeter.org.uk/resources>

Digital access points in Exeter September 2023

Exeter Library – 2 hours of computer access available to the public (this is available to members, however membership is free and easy). Lots of available support (see above). Open 9-6pm.

St Sidwell's community centre – 1 computer, free for public use. Printing services available. Informal help from staff/volunteers. Open 9-3pm.

Exeter county council – 4 PCs available, but only for use of council services. Both informal and formal help available (book appointment) for use of council services. Tend to direct people towards library for general internet access. Open 9-2pm

Pinhoe Library – three computers that are free to use up to 2 hours a day. Open hours vary day by day.

Wonford community centre – free wifi access, computer access not listed on website. Open 9-9pm.

Beacon Heath family centre - , computer access not listed on website. Open 9-5pm.

CoLab – 1 laptop available for public use. Offer support with benefits, setting up SIM cards ect. Run occasional computer support courses. Also advertise library courses. Open 9.30- 4pm weekdays.