

Evidence Submission

Age UK's submission to the House of Lords
COVID-19 Committee Inquiry - Living online: the long-
term impact on wellbeing

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About this consultation

The House of Lords COVID-19 Committee is looking at how the rapidly increasing reliance on digital technology, accelerated by the pandemic, may have a long-term impact on our social and economic wellbeing. It is initially considering the impact of digitalisation on four key drivers of wellbeing: physical health; mental health; social interaction; and quality of working life.

Introduction

Age UK is a national charity that works with a network of partners, including Age Scotland, Age Cymru, Age NI and local Age UKs across England. Our work focuses on ensuring that older people: have enough money; enjoy life and feel well; receive high quality health and care; are comfortable, safe and secure at home; and feel valued and able to participate. Last year Age UK nationally and locally responded to around 8.5 million information and advice enquiries, face-to-face, on the phone, online, and through written materials.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this inquiry and agree that it is important to consider the impact that increasing reliance on digital technology may have on the long-term impact on our social and economic wellbeing. In this response we look at how this is affecting older people. We also consider the support that is needed going forward, both in respect of helping more older people benefit from being digitally engaged and ensuring that those who are not, are not disadvantaged.

Summary and recommendations

In 2019, there were 2.8 million people aged 75+, 1.1 million people aged 65-74, and 0.5 million people aged 55-64 in the UK who did not use the internet. Two-fifths (39%) of people aged 50 plus in England say they are using the internet more since the coronavirus outbreak. However, usage has increased most among groups already using the internet regularly and so far, there is little evidence that the pandemic has led to significant numbers of those previously digitally excluded getting online.

While remote consultations and greater reliance on digital health services have worked well for some older people, for others this is leading to a worse experience and difficulties in accessing services. It is essential that all older people requiring or wanting face-to-face support can still receive this.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced opportunities for older people to take part in physical activity, led to an increase in sedentary behaviour, and had a significant impact on large numbers of older people's mobility, strength, and balance. Digital solutions like online videos and apps that encourage and monitor activity can be of benefit, but older people need to be involved in their design and may need to be supported to use such options. And those without online access need support to stay active in other ways.

While digital technology cannot replace personal contact, there is some evidence that technology can play a positive role for older people's mental health and wellbeing in some circumstances. It can be useful for maintaining social contact and has helped in delivering mental health services by video link or online for some people. But there are challenges and not everyone has the access to technology or is comfortable using it.

With State Pension age rising and people having to work for longer than ever, it is vital that all workers are fully equipped with the skills necessary to play a full part in the labour market. There is a risk that many workers aged 50+ will be disadvantaged by a move towards more digital workplaces, including increased use of homeworking, particularly among those in lower paid roles or who have a lower level of qualification. It is important that everybody has the opportunity to improve their digital skills in order for them to remain in or access good quality work.

The move to greater digitalisation has had an impact on the ability of some older people to carry out their normal daily living activities and this can have a negative impact on wellbeing. Those who are offline, or have limited access to technology, need to be able to shop, bank and access cash in a way that enables them to maintain control and independence.

Enabling older people to be safe and confident online takes time. There is a need for far greater resources to be available so that Age UK and other organisations can reach many more people and provide the ongoing and in-depth support they need to get online and improve their digital skills at this difficult time.

The pandemic has increased reliance on digital technology, and while we do not yet know what the long-term impact will be, it seems likely that some changes will be permanent. It is important that, going forward, everyone benefits from living in an increasingly digital world. This requires three things: digital services and support designed to meet the needs of all groups who can take advantage of them, greater levels of support to improve digital engagement, and the continuation of alternative ways of access for those who do not use the internet and are unlikely to ever do so.

Older people, digital exclusion, and the impact of COVID-19

Digital exclusion is linked to age, as well as disability and socioeconomic factors. Although internet use among older age groups has increased over recent years, ONS figures show that in 2019, in the UK, there were still 2.8 million people aged 75+ (53%), 1.1 million people aged 65-74 (17%) and 0.5 million people aged 55-64 (6.7%) who did not use the internet (never used, or not in the last three months).ⁱ The latest wave of the English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing (ELSA), covering 2018-19, also found around half (47%) of those aged 75+ in England did not use the internet along with 15% aged 65-74.ⁱⁱ

We now also have data from the ELSA COVID-19 Substudy which took place in June and July 2020. This shows that internet use was very similar to that in 2018-19 for the 50-64 and 65-74 age groups, but for those aged 75+ it rose from 53% in 2018-19 to 58%. However, a rise of 5% over this period is much as would be expected given trends in internet use among older age groups. Around two-fifths of people aged 50+ in England say they are using the internet more since the coronavirus outbreak. However, usage has increased most among the 50 to 74 age groups who were already likely to be using the internet regularly. Only around a quarter (24%) of people aged 75+ said they were using it more and nearly one in ten (9%) were using it less. We therefore conclude that in the first few months of the pandemic, there was not a substantial increase in digital engagement among those who are offline, despite the move to greater digitalisation.

While anecdotally we know that some older people are taking up new online activities, the figures suggest there are many who are not. However, it is hard to get a detailed picture of life in lockdown for those who are not online. People may be relying more on family, friends, or local organisations, or may be managing in other ways. However, we are concerned that there are older people who have limited social contact but are normally independent and who are finding life difficult under current restrictions. They may not want to ask for help or not know where to go for support.

Accessing health services

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic older people found that their medical appointments were largely cancelled, postponed, or conducted virtually. Prior to the pandemic it was estimated that 95% of GP appointments were conducted face-to-face, whereas since COVID-19, 85% of appointments have been delivered remotely.ⁱⁱⁱ

For some older people this has worked well, but others have faced difficulties. Age UK polling has revealed that 13% of older people who have been using technology to access

healthcare services said they like this approach more or much more than they did before the pandemic, while 24% like it much less.^{iv} The ONS has similarly identified concerns with remote appointments, with 16% of older people stating that they are uncomfortable attending an online appointment with a health professional.^v

Those older people who are concerned about virtual consultations told us they feel uncomfortable discussing their feelings over the phone and are worried that doctors will be unable to accurately diagnose them. Some face additional challenges, such as hearing problems or communication difficulties, which make virtual consultations near on impossible. Given the level of digital exclusion in the UK, video calls are not an option at all for significant numbers. Challenges in accessing digital services have left some older people increasingly reliant on friends and family to speak on their behalf.

Some older people who have accessed remote healthcare say that their patient experience has been worse as a result. They have had to repeat the same information to different health professionals multiple times, or have found that simple processes, such as vitamin injections, which normally can be organised immediately have become convoluted and taken weeks to sort out. Many older people have not been able to get through to their GP surgery at all due to long call wait times and have given up. Insight work by National Voices has identified further issues. This includes patients being given wide time slots and feeling afraid to leave the house in case their GP calls, having to repeat information which the healthcare professional already has access to, or feeling that they were not properly listened to.^{vi} Even more concerning, a minority of older people have told Age UK about examples of poor clinical practice, which they attribute to lack of face-to-face communication. This includes being prescribed inappropriate medication or being admitted to hospital following unsuitable care over the phone.

On top of accessing appointments, older people who are digitally excluded have faced additional challenges in receiving the information and care which they need during the pandemic. While COVID-19 tests can now be booked over the phone, you need an email address or mobile which can receive texts to receive your results. Some older people have had to use their friend's or family's email addresses, while some who do not have this option have been told they cannot have a test at all. Accessing information is also more challenging for people without the internet. The move to providing guidance online means that digital technology is now a form of health literacy. Lower health literacy has been shown to lead to worse health outcomes.^{vii}

In conclusion, while some older people may benefit from the move to remote consultations, it is essential that those requiring or wanting face-to-face support can still access it. When remote consultations take place, the process should be made as simple as possible. Older people should be provided with instructions on how they can access their appointment and support to do so. They should be given a specific time to expect the call and not be required to repeat their medical history each time they need support.

Physical activity

The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced opportunities for older people to take part in physical activity, led to an increase in sedentary behaviour, and had a significant impact on large numbers of older people's mobility, strength, and balance. Decline in physical activity levels throughout this time has been higher amongst over 75s than any other age group, with only a third of people of over 75s saying they have been active during this period.^{viii} The proportion of adults over the age of 75 who are now classified as inactive has also increased to over 50%.^{ix}

As a result of reduced activity, one in four older people cannot walk as far as they did before, while one in five feel less steady on their feet. Many older people are also lacking motivation and confidence to do the levels of activity which they did before. A third of older people say they feel less motivated to do the activities they used to enjoy, while one in five feel less confident going for a walk outside by themselves.^x

COVID-19 will continue to impact on older people's lives and their ability to stay active for months, if not years, after the pandemic has been contained. Not only will they have reduced opportunities to be active, but many will face additional challenges from lack of confidence and motivation, as well as reduced capability. Older people need to be provided with a diverse support offer to meet their needs.

For some older people, digital solutions will work well. Recent research by the Physiological Society and the Centre for Ageing Better has identified that 18% of 65-74 year olds and 16% of people 75+ think online exercise programmes targeted at older people would help them to maintain their health through the pandemic. Meanwhile, 23% of 65-74 year olds and 20% of people 75+ say they would find exercise programmes for older people on TV beneficial.^{xi}

However, for digital solutions to be effective it is essential that older people are included throughout the design process and that technology meets their needs. The National Institute of Health Research has identified that when technology is developed for older people, designers focus on developing the systems they believe will work, instead of finding out what older people need and testing solutions which could meet these needs.^{xii} As a result, take-up of technology is often low, with as much as 40% of technology which is installed in the home never being used.^{xiii} After developing digital solutions, it is also necessary in many cases to provide older people with ongoing support to be able to access and make the most of them.

It is also important that older people without digital access are given the support they need to stay physically active. We have had some feedback that during the first lockdown hard copy materials and radio coverage supported some older people to be more active at home. The need to remain as active as possible at home will become even more important over the winter months when the weather will make it harder to get out and about.

Mental health

Evidence around the impact of technology on older people's mental health and wellbeing is patchy, but there are promising signs that technological solutions could benefit some older people if appropriately developed, introduced, and supported.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health services have been predominantly delivered online or by video call. For some older people this can present challenges. Research by Rethink Mental Illness revealed that a large proportion of people with severe mental illness find it harder to express themselves and be honest during remote mental health consultations.^{xiv} On top of this, some people do not have a space in which they can have appointments in their own home and fear being overheard by the people they live with.

However, it is important that health professionals do not presume older people will be unable or unwilling to receive treatment remotely. Referrals to NHS talking therapies IAPT (Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies) throughout the pandemic have declined, but recovery rates for older people who have received talking therapies over the phone or online have remained consistent, suggesting it is a viable option for some older people.^{xv}

Loneliness and social interactions

Many clubs, activities, and voluntary work, which older people previously engaged with have been put on hold, while friends and family have needed to stay away, leaving many older people feeling lonely and isolated. While many of us have moved our lives online, including large numbers of older people, those who do not use the internet are unable to connect digitally with friends or family. This has impacted on some older people's ability to sustain relationships and left them feeling isolated and excluded. This is likely to be even harder for some people as Christmas approaches.

- 22% of people aged 60+ say that the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting on their relationships.
- 14% of people aged 60+ say that they are spending too much time alone and 18% report feeling lonely either all the time or some of the time.^{xvi}
- Almost 2 million older people are expecting to feel lonely this Christmas – including almost a third of widows and widowers.
- 7.7 million older people (more than half of the older population) are concerned they won't see their family and friends this Christmas.

While, as stated above, in the first few months of the pandemic there did not appear to be a major reduction in the overall numbers of older people who were digital excluded, maintaining social contacts is likely to be the factor that motivates some people to get online or learn new skills. For example, being able to see friends and family via a video link can be a great help when face-to-face contact is not possible.

People with limited digital skills are likely to feel more confident about carrying out activities such as emailing and making video calls compared to activities such as shopping and banking online where they may be concerned about making financial transactions. However, to be able to gain such skills many will need support and it is essential that help is available as outlined below.

Keeping in contact in other ways is also important. For example, Age UK's free Telephone Friendship Services offer those who are feeling lonely regular friendly chats or a listening ear whenever someone needs to talk. These have been a lifeline to thousands of older people, particularly during the last few months.

There are also lots of ways that family, neighbours, and community groups are providing help and support through telephone calls, letters and offering practical assistance.

- 5.8 million older people say they wouldn't have got through the pandemic without their friends.
- Almost 2 million older people said they wouldn't have got through the pandemic without the kindness of strangers.

Work

With State Pension age rising and people having to work for longer than ever, it is vital that all workers are fully equipped with the skills necessary to play a full part in the labour market. Personal development is important regardless of age, and as the concept of a 'job for life' becomes increasingly outdated, individuals of all ages will increasingly need to re- and up-skill in order to remain active in the labour market.

Age UK is concerned that many workers aged 50+ will be disadvantaged by a longer-term transition towards more digital workplaces, including increased use of homeworking. This could be particularly disadvantageous for those working in lower paid roles or who have a lower level of qualification, as they are less likely to work in professional jobs where homeworking is readily available. It is important that everybody has the opportunity to improve their digital skills in order for them to remain in or access good quality work.

We are pleased by the creation of the National Retraining Scheme, which should in theory allow more older workers with lower level qualifications the opportunities to undertake training; and similarly for those who are unemployed the recent investment in Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches and the back-to-work offer – this investment however needs to be clear what it will deliver for older jobseekers and other disadvantaged groups, including around improving digital skills,

In spite of these recent initiatives, overall, since 2010 there have also been substantial cuts to the training budget available to older workers, partly in favour of greater funding for apprenticeships. We are concerned this has had a detrimental effect on participation in other forms of workplace training – while we support the drive to increase apprenticeship numbers, they are unlikely to be suitable for the majority of older workers and should not be funded at the expense of other training options.

In terms of the numbers taking part, recent years have seen a rise and subsequent fall in the number of older apprentices. In 2009/10, there were 10,000 apprentices aged 45+: this increased to about 60,000 older apprentices in 2014/15^{xvii} before a decline to 34,000 in 2017/18.^{xviii} While looking at apprenticeships alone does not give us the full picture (and Age UK agrees with the reasons behind some of the policy changes), this downward trend is concerning because it indicates fewer opportunities for older workers to access training. It will be exacerbated if employers, individuals, or other publicly funded schemes are not increasing their own investment in training accordingly. A full investigation into participation among the 50+ cohort is needed.

Shopping, banking, and access to cash

The move to greater digitalisation has had an impact on the ability of some older people to carry out their normal daily living activities which can have a negative impact on wellbeing. Accessing grocery shopping was a major problem for many older people at the start of the pandemic. Those who are offline but who were unable to get out to the shops, were left in very difficult circumstances, while others could not get a supermarket slot even if they were online. Friends, families, voluntary organisations, and community groups rallied

round but the winter months are likely to be challenging. Some supermarkets and local shops have introduced non-digital options such as phone ordering for deliveries and we would like to see such services continue to be developed.

Another area where there has been an impact from increased digitalisation is banking and access to cash. Older people and many others rely on cash for their day-to-day spending. The surge in cash withdrawals ahead of the second national English lockdown may be indicative of this.^{xix} This could be for carers and cleaners or paying back a neighbour that shops or pays a bill on their behalf. Many, particularly those on low incomes, use cash to help them budget their expenditure and often cannot afford the equipment and Wi-Fi to allow them access to online banking and payments. Those with physical or mental health problems, cognitive issues, or disabilities may struggle to use digital payments and services. They are often better served by physical or in-person options and support. Those in rural areas may simply not have the connectivity to pay by card or to be able to access mobile internet or home broadband.

Below is an example of concerns expressed by someone who contacted Age UK's Advice Line.

I've been very good at managing my finances all my life but have not taken up online banking or contactless payments. I'm starting to panic now because the pandemic has accelerated the trend towards digital banking & payments in the UK. My home PC is 10 years old & I access the internet via mobile phone tethering. This keeps costs down which has been very important for me but would not be a safe way to connect to the internet for online banking. Nor do I want to use a banking app on my mobile phone because I don't think my phone is secure. It feels like I'm running out of options & I absolutely hate this bullying drive to what's termed 'the new normal' for the way we make payments & manage our money. My hardware at home wouldn't even enable me to conduct a video call.

In short, many older people rely on cash and branch services to fully engage in society and have control over their income and savings and financial independence. Reliance on cash is perhaps more an issue of income rather than age, which means that it will not just affect this generation of older people but future ones in an increasingly ageing society.

Supporting people to use digital technology

Throughout this response we have emphasised that while those who do not use technology should always be able to access services and support in a way that suits them, many older people who are online are benefiting greatly from being part of the digital world. There are also many more who could benefit from being digitally engaged but need support to do so.

To those who cannot imagine life without the internet, it may seem obvious that the restrictions imposed by the pandemic would prompt more older people to start using digital technology or to increase its use. However, this would be to underestimate the barriers that people face. These include lack of skills, concern about scams and security, the cost of broadband and equipment, having no-one to help when things go wrong, and difficulties due to physical impairments or cognitive decline.

Age UK has extensive experience of delivering digital inclusion programmes and resources which aim to support older people to develop the skills and confidence to live an independent life in an increasingly digital world. We know that older learners generally need ongoing support, tailored to their needs and preferences, and often this is most effective when delivered on a one-to-one basis. Traditionally, digital inclusion programmes have relied on face-to-face engagement. But with recent restrictions, Age UK services nationally and locally have had to develop support that can be accessed remotely, over the telephone or via video call. In one initiative, Age UK was donated around 500 tablets to be distributed to older people who are most at risk of digital exclusion. These are provided along with instructions and follow up support.

The pandemic has made it more important than ever that people can obtain support to learn to use digital technology or increase their digital skills. However, at the same time, they may be seeing friends and families less so have limited informal support, and may not be able to access the internet at public places such as libraries or be able to travel to centres that provide training with digital skills.

Even before organisations can start to provide support, there is the challenge of reaching people, engaging their interest, and demonstrating the benefits of being online. The ELSA COVID-19 Substudy found, even with restrictions brought about by the pandemic, only 15% of non-users aged 75+ and 19% of 65-74 year olds expressed any interest in using the internet. These findings are echoed by some local Age UK's providing digital support services who say it can take time and effort to reach digitally excluded older people and motivate them to have a go at using digital technology. Some older people still feel it will not benefit them or assume that once the pandemic is over life will return to how it was before.

There is a great need for more resources for Age UK and other organisations, so they are able to reach out to older people and then provide the ongoing and in-depth support they need to get online and improve their digital skills at this difficult time.

Conclusion

The pandemic has increased reliance on digital technology, and while we do not yet know what the long-term impact will be, it seems likely that some of these changes will be permanent. It is important that, going forward, we ensure that everyone benefits from living in an increasingly digital world. This requires three things: digital services and support designed to meet the needs of all groups who can take advantage of them, greater levels of support to improve digital engagement, and the continuation of alternative ways of access for those who are not online.

ⁱ ONS, Internet Users, 2019.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2019>

ⁱⁱ Age UK analysis of ELSA Covid-19 Substudy, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ National Voices and the Health Foundation (2020), 'The Dr will Zoom you now: getting the most out of the virtual health and care experience'.

https://www.nationalvoices.org.uk/sites/default/files/public/publications/the_dr_will_zoom_you_now_-_insights_report.pdf

^{iv} Age UK online polling (unpublished) conducted on the Research Express Online Omnibus (part of Kantar UK Ltd) amongst 1364 UK adults aged 60+ from 20th August – 3rd September 2020.

^v Office for National Statistics (2020), 'Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain', published 21st August 2020. Available at

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritaindata/current>

^{vi} National Voices (2020), 'The Dr will Zoom you now.'

https://www.nationalvoices.org.uk/sites/default/files/public/publications/the_dr_will_zoom_you_now_-_insights_report-min.pdf

^{vii} NHS Digital (2020), 'Digital inclusion for health and social care'. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/about-nhs-digital/our-work/digital-inclusion>

^{viii} Sport England (2020), 'Active adult lives survey (mid-March to mid-May 2020), Coronavirus (Covid-19) report'.

Available at: https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-10/Active%20Lives%20Adult%20May%2019-20%20Coronavirus%20Report.pdf?2L6TBVV5UvCGXb_VxZcWHcfFX0_wRal7&utm_source=The%20King%27s%20Fund%20newsletters%20%28main%20account%29&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=11898514_NEWSL_HWB_2020-10-26&dm_i=21A8,730YA,W573V8,SOPP9,1

^{ix} Ibid

^x Age UK, 'The impact of Covid-19 to date on older people's physical and mental health'. Available at:

https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/health--wellbeing/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-older-people_age-uk.pdf

^{xi} The Physiological Society and Centre for Ageing Better (2020), 'A national Covid-19 resilience programme: improving the health and wellbeing of older people during the pandemic.'

^{xii} National Institute for Health Research (2018), Help at home: use of assistive technology for older people. Available at: <https://www.dc.nihr.ac.uk/themed-reviews/Help-at-home-WEB.pdf>

^{xiii} Ibid

^{xiv} Rethink Mental Illness, 'Access to NHS mental health services for people living with severe mental illness.'

<https://www.rethink.org/media/3793/access-to-mh-services-final-040220.pdf>

^{xv} NHS Digital, 'Psychological therapies: report on the use of IAPT services, England June 2020 Final including reports on the IAPT pilots and quarter 1 data 2020-21'. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and->

[information/publications/statistical/psychological-therapies-report-on-the-use-of-iapt-services/june-2020-final-including-reports-on-the-iapt-pilots-and-quarter-1-data-2020-21](#)

^{xvi} Office for National Statistics (2020), 'Coronavirus and the social impacts of Great Britain', published 6th November 2020. Available at: <https://static.physoc.org/app/uploads/2020/11/09152548/A-National-Covid-19-Resilience-Programme-report-web-version.pdf><https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritaindata>

^{xvii} The FE Data Service 2015, Apprenticeships start statistics

^{xviii} House of Commons Library (Feb 2019), Apprenticeship Statistics, England

^{xix} <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2020/nov/03/cash-withdrawals-surge-ahead-of-england-lockdown>