

How to signpost residents to digital skills support

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The internet has created vast levels of opportunity for so many corners of society. The ability to access information, interact with services, and complete everyday tasks more quickly and easily than would ever have been thought possible just a few short years ago, has greatly enriched so many people's experience of the world.

However, not everyone has equal access to internet-connected technology — nor the knowledge and skills to use it to full effect when given the chance. Digital exclusion is a problem that local government has a huge role to play in addressing and solving.

Read on to learn:

- why digital exclusion and digital skills support is such an important community issue
- which groups in society are most likely to need digital skills support
- top tips on signposting local residents to digital skills support

Why digital exclusion and digital skills support is important

For the UK to be a world-leading digital economy that works for everyone, it is crucial that everyone has the digital skills they need to fully participate in society.

- Department for Culture Media and Sport, [Digital skills and inclusion policy paper, March 2017](#)

We now expect to be able to interact with and use public services online as standard. And from a local council's perspective, this can seem like a win-win transition. The shift away from traditional in-person or over-the-phone services in favour of web-based services is not only responding to popular public demand — 'going digital' can also generate much-needed cost efficiencies.

However, while the benefits of digital technology are clear, there is a flip-side. We can easily forget that the internet is still a relatively new societal force. The fact is, not everyone in our community yet has the knowledge or skills to use it effectively.

Around 20% of the UK population lacks the basic skills needed to send and receive email, use a search engine, browse the internet and complete online forms. In other words, digital literacy isn't something we can take for granted.

Who is most affected by digital exclusion and why

Despite the growth in popularity of smartphones and tablets etc., there will always be a percentage of the population that are unable to access or make use of that technology to full effect. Methods will always be required to ensure you stay in contact with those groups.

- Cllr Anthony McKeown

According to government research, there are four key barriers to digital inclusion (and more than one may affect individuals at any one time):

Access: the ability to connect to the internet and go online

Skills: the ability to use the internet and online services

Confidence: a fear of crime, lack of trust or not knowing where to start online

Motivation: understanding why using the internet is relevant and helpful

Statistics suggest that age, gender, health and socio-economic status heavily influence likelihood of digital exclusion. For example, in 2015 just 1% of 16-24 year olds had never used the internet, compared with 32% of those aged 65 and older.

Individuals living with disabilities that prevent them from using technology in the same ways as many other residents are another obvious group who are important to bear in mind as councillors in our approach to digital.

Additionally, a 2010 ONS survey found that:

- 55% of those with no formal qualifications had never used the internet compared with 2% of those with a degree
- 33% of those in semi-routine and routine occupations had never used the internet
- 17% of those with an annual income of less than £20,700 had never used the internet compared with 2% of those with an annual income greater than £41,600

In summary, a 'great digital divide' still exists in society, and local community figures such as councillors can have an influential role to play in addressing it.

Top tips for addressing digital exclusion and signposting to digital skills support

Things like social media should be used to augment your engagement processes — but not replace them. It is still important to leaflet areas where there are issues, make sure we attend public meetings and hold off line surgeries.

- Cllr Paul Deach

- **Take the time to become aware of and engage with the most vulnerable groups to digital exclusion in your community:** typically, older people are more likely to have become excluded from digital technology, however socio-economic factors can exclude people of all ages.
- **Raise the issue of digital exclusion and the importance of digital skills training with local businesses and employers:** many organisations are still experiencing a shortage in basic digital knowledge and skills among staff, but may not necessarily have become consciously aware of the need to address it.
- **Research and build relationships with relevant digital skills support groups and community centres:** as digital exclusion has become more and more of an issue, the number of digital skills support groups and organisations has increased significantly. Seek out such groups and pay them a visit to learn more about how digital skills are being taught in your community.
- **Signpost and promote relevant organisations and groups:** make sure you collect the details of relevant contacts to share with those you think may be in need of digital skills support. Keep hold of any promotional materials such as leaflets, and promote digital skills support organisations and websites such as Digital Unite on your website, blog and social media channels.
- **Raise awareness of library facilities:** a recent push by the Government to ensure all public libraries provide free computer and Wifi access makes them a good facility to encourage those who may be digitally excluded to use.

Further reading and useful links

- [Digital Unite](#) provides a range of information, products, localised services to support digital skills learning in communities.
- [Government Digital Inclusion Strategy](#)
- [Search local library facilities](#)

Next steps

- ▶ [A guide to cyberbullying](#)
 - ▶ [A guide to internet security](#)
 - ▶ [How to set up and run your Facebook page](#)
 - ▶ [How to build and manage your Twitter following](#)
 - ▶ [How to run a virtual surgery](#)
 - ▶ [How to make councillor surgeries more digitally connected](#)
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