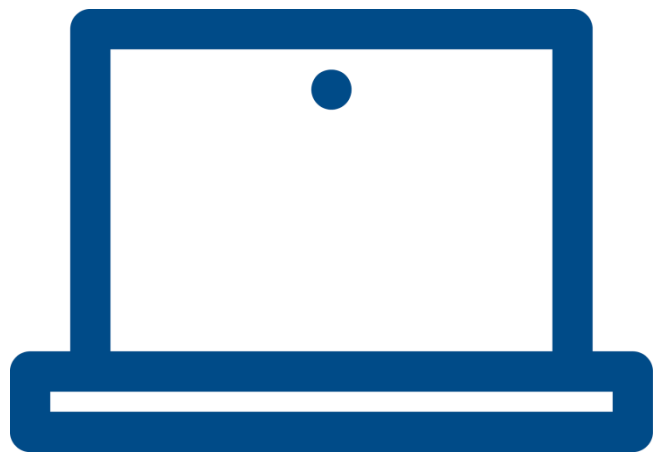


Improving Digital Access



Report produced by Citizens Advice across
Dorset, Bournemouth, and Poole

February 2018



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Background

There is a growing expectation that many tasks should be completed digitally whether that's applying for a job, shopping, personal banking or making a benefit application. This makes sense for those who are able to do so and is seen as an efficient and effective delivery of services by service providers.

However it is becoming apparent that not everyone is able to engage digitally or wishes to do so. As a result evidence suggests there is a digital divide and some members of our communities have been left behind and are unable to access vital resources.

More of the services that our clients need have already moved online at a local level, or are being moved online by central Government as it pursues digital delivery of public services. Our advisers see first-hand how the lack of digital access impacts on people's lives, most notably when applying for benefits or social housing.

Citizens Advice is a supporter of digital services and committed to ensuring that they can be fully exploited by the majority of the population. However, we are concerned that there will be a minority who, through no fault of their own are never able to, do not want to or need support to use online services. We are therefore committed to ensuring that those in greatest need can receive the most appropriate service quickly, efficiently and in the way that best meets their needs.

During September 2017 three Citizens Advice offices in Dorset conducted a Pilot Study to ascertain the levels of digital access amongst their clients and the main issues regarding access. This Pilot found that about 30% of the respondents had no access to the internet or could not use a computer or smart phone.

From this Pilot Study it was agreed that a broader piece of research needed to be conducted which focused on how clients use the internet, the reasons some don't do so and the challenges they face. From this we would draw conclusions and make recommendations to inform and influence the delivery of digital services at a local level.

Research Methods

The Citizens Advice evidence base is second to none. Every year, across Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole the service assists around 27,000 people in resolving their problems by telephone, or through face-to-face services¹.

This gives us a valuable insight into the problems clients face, particularly with their interactions with national and local government digital services. Citizens Advice is

¹ Number of clients who contacted Citizens Advice across Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole from April 2016 to March 2017.

able to use this information about clients' problems to inform and influence the development of policies and services.

This research is based on the following methodologies:

1. The initial Pilot Study was conducted during September 2017 across three local authority areas and this helped determine the focus of the wider research project. A total of 122 clients were surveyed in the study.
2. The Pilot Study included some in depth follow-up telephone interviews with 16 respondents and the case studies included in this report are based on these interviews
3. A second Survey, building on the Pilot Study, was completed by 344 of our clients during 10 working days in November 2017 across Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole (see Appendix). The survey was carried out in various ways in the different offices. Some participants completed the paper-based survey themselves, while others were assisted by the adviser or receptionist in person or over the phone. The results of the second Survey are presented in this report.
4. We investigated the provision of free basic skills computer courses and access to computers in libraries across Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole.

The range of clients taking part in our surveys is not likely to be typical of the general population². 44% of Citizens Advice clients state they have a disability or long term health condition whereas this is stated by 21% of the population of England and Wales. Many of our clients are disadvantaged economically with 18% being unemployed compared with 4% of the population of England and Wales. There is also a difference in age profile with Citizens Advice clients aged 17 – 24 being relatively under represented. Therefore our surveys can be interpreted as giving an indication of the digital experiences of a group of people who generally face more difficulties than the population at large. We think that their experiences give valuable insight that can be used to develop better digital services and support.

Digital Access – Policy Context

UK Digital Strategy 2017

In March 2017 the Government published the *UK Digital Strategy*³. The heart of the strategy is 'to ensure that everyone is able to access and use the digital services that could help them manage their lives, progress at work, improve their health and wellbeing, and connect to friends and family.'

² Citizens Advice: Profile of clients helped England and Wales Q3 2017/18

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-digital-strategy/uk-digital-strategy>

The strategy also summarises the Government's ambition to continue to work across government and the public sector using digital applications to improve the efficiency of our public services. In summary, providing a better service at a lower cost.

Service Manual and Digital Service Standard

The government's Service Manual⁴ has been written to help 'government teams create and run great digital services that meet the Digital Service Standard'. This would include DWP, HMRC and HM Courts and Tribunals Service.

The Digital Service Standard⁵, described in the Service Manual, is a set of 18 criteria to help government create and run good digital services. All public facing transactional services must meet the standard and it is used to check whether a service is good enough for public use. The 14th criterion is particularly relevant to this report as it requires services to, 'Encourage all users to use the digital service (with assisted digital support if required) alongside an appropriate plan to phase out non-digital channels and services.'

Assisted digital support is for people who need to use a digital service but don't have the skills or access to do so on their own and the Service Manual describes how this can be done. It says that support can be either:

- someone guiding a user through the digital service
- someone entering the user's information into the service on their behalf

The type of support allowed is specified. It can be provided by:

- phone,
- web chat
- face to face

and it is made clear that paper solutions must not be used. The Service Manual says that the support should be provided where the users need it, including their own home.

Local Government

LocalGov Digital is the network for digital practitioners in local government who deliver services which include Housing and Council tax. Here there is a Local Government Digital Service Standard⁶ very similar to the one for central government, working towards greater uptake of digital services and referring practitioners to the Service Manual for more guidance.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/service-manual>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/service-standard>

⁶ <https://localgovdigital.info/localgov-digital-makers/outputs/local-government-digital-service-standard/standard/>

Digital Access - National and Local Statistics

There is a wealth of information both nationally and locally regarding digital access. This section of our report provides a summary of three main pieces of research which focus on internet usage, access to the internet and levels of basic digital skills. These will give broader context to our research study.

Internet Usage –ONS Bulletin 2017

Most recent studies point to internet usage increasing amongst adults. Research conducted by the ONS⁷ from January to March 2017 demonstrated 89% of adults in the UK had recently used the internet (in the last 3 months), up from 88% in 2016; while 9% had never used the internet, down from 10% in 2016.

The ONS study demonstrated differences between age group where virtually all adults aged 16 to 34 years were recent internet users (99%), in contrast with only 41% of adults aged 75 years and over.

It also demonstrated the high but decreasing level of non-usage of the internet amongst disabled adults, 22% of whom had never used the internet in 2017, down from 25% in 2016.

Basic Digital Skills 2015

The Get Digital Basic Digital Skills Framework⁸ gives a standard of what citizens and organisations need to achieve to participate fully in the digital world, and how to get there. It was created in 2015 by Go ON UK, working with a wide range of partners from academia, the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. They devised 5 areas to demonstrate digital capability;

- Managing information
- Communicating
- Transacting
- Problem solving
- Creating

In terms of digital skills the Basic Digital Skills UK Report⁹ published in 2015 suggests that

- 77% of the UK adult population have basic digital skills
- 23%, or an estimated 12.6 million adults in the UK don't have the required level of basic digital skills.

⁷ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2017>

⁸ Basic Digital Skills Framework

⁹ Basic Digital Skills UK Report 2015,

Local Levels of Digital Exclusion 2017

To ensure that access to digital tools and skills is uniform in all parts of the UK, a working group of the Tech Partnership, Lloyds Banking Group, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the Local Government Association was established. Its aim is to explore localised digital exclusion levels and from its work it is clear there is still some way to go to ensure uniform access to digital tools and skills.

The group produced a HeatMap (see link¹⁰ below) showing the likelihood of digital exclusion across the UK. This combined a range of data including Broadband connection, 4G and digital usage, together with data on age, education, income and health. In combination, this creates a tiered, 9-point scale measuring likelihood of overall exclusion (or inclusion). Common causes for exclusion include lack of skills or confidence to use technology, lack of access to devices and connectivity or not seeing relevance or importance in gaining digital skills.

Looking at local authority areas in Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole on the HeatMap, four were graded at medium risk of experiencing digital exclusion, while the remaining were considered low risk.

Local Authority areas more likely to experience digital exclusion across Dorset, Bournemouth, and Poole

North Dorset
Purbeck
West Dorset
Weymouth and Portland

The extensive data sets used to produce the HeatMap could be very useful for services to target their resources regarding internet access and the provision of basic skills training.

Digital Access – Our Findings

Our research was conducted during a 10 working day period across Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole Citizens Advice. There were 344 respondents to our survey. For ease of reading the findings have been divided into those surveyed who had regular access to the internet and those who did not. We then focus on assisted digital services and the needs of those accessing digital services with disabilities and long term health conditions.

¹⁰ <http://heatmap.thetechpartnership.com/>

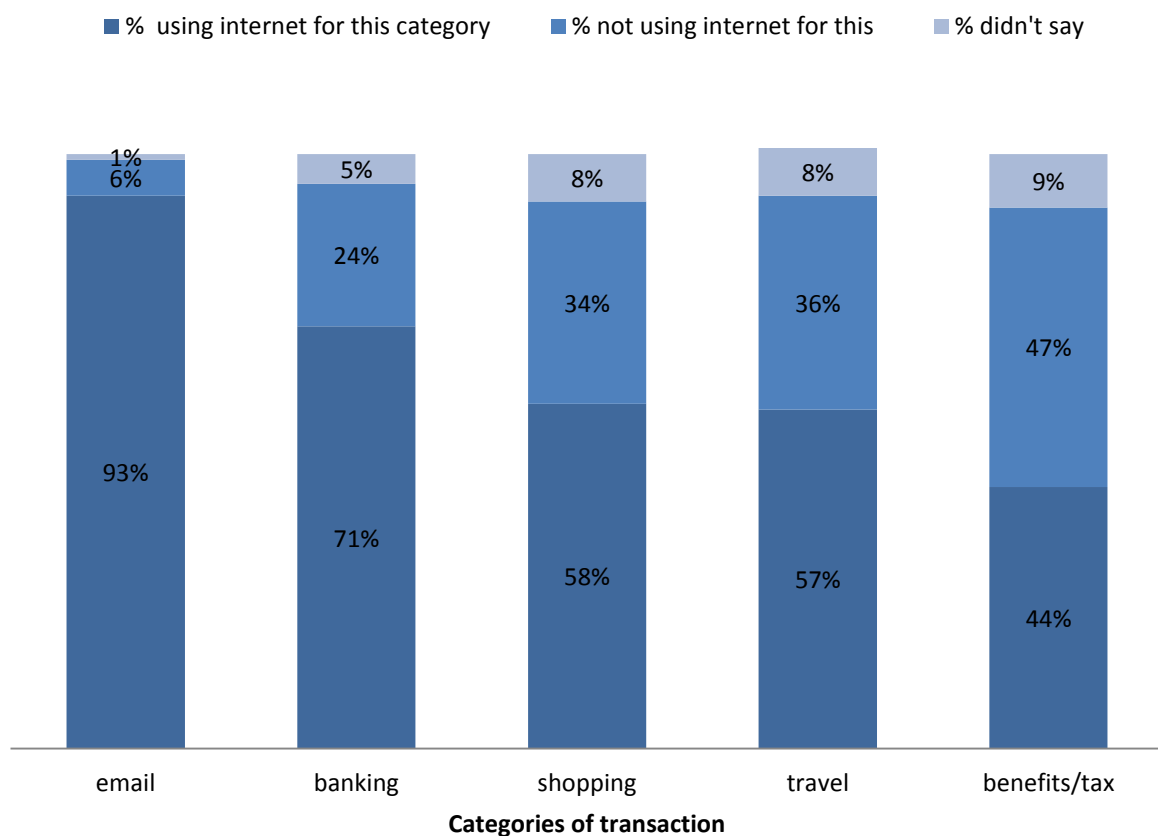
Part 1 – Respondents with regular internet access

In our study of 344 respondents, 3 out of 4 (263) had access to the internet at home or another convenient location.



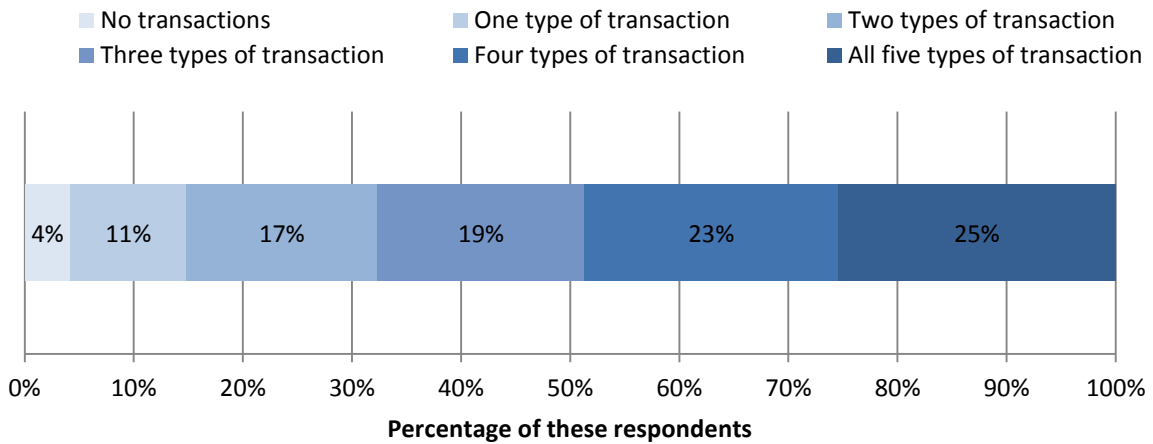
Of those who had regular convenient access to the internet, most were likely to use the internet to communicate using email and to conduct banking transactions (Chart 1).

Chart 1. Use of internet for five given categories of transactions by those with regular access.



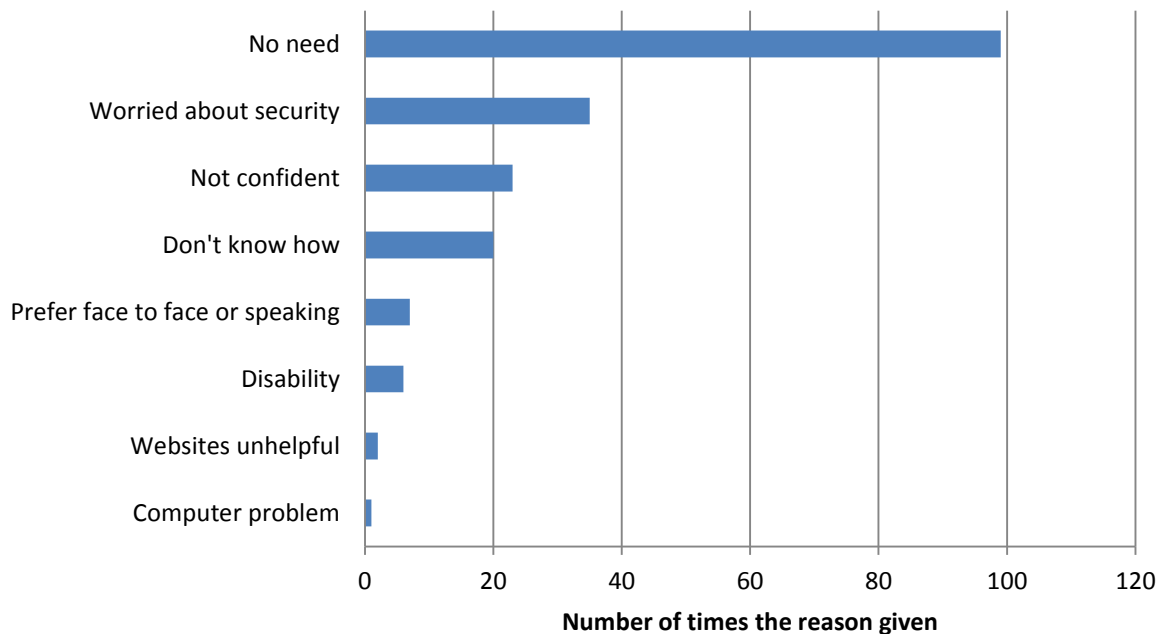
1 in 4 of those who had regular access to the internet conducted all five types of transaction – email, banking, shopping, travel and benefits/tax and almost half of the respondents could complete four types of transactions (Chart 2). This would suggest that these respondents have skills in some of the five areas covered in the Basic Digital Skills Framework, described on page 7.

Chart 2. Breadth of use of the internet by those respondents with regular access.



However over half of the respondents with internet access use it for limited or no transactions. Many have made a choice not to, or are unable to use the internet for certain transactions. After the reason ‘no need’, concerns regarding security and lack of confidence were the most cited reasons (Chart 3). There is clearly more to be done in boosting people’s knowledge and skills, especially about internet security.

Chart 3. Reasons for not using the internet for some transactions. All responses (multi-choice and free entry) given by those with regular access.



The following free entry responses and case study are examples of what respondents said.



"I always prefer to talk to people to have it explained to me."

"I prefer to see what I am buying."

"I have epilepsy and the screen causes seizures."

"Although I have broadband at the moment I do struggle to pay the monthly bills."



Maureen a pensioner with a computer at home said she does not trust the security of the computer for personal information and worries about scams. She is very concerned about the move to do everything on line.

There remained a wish amongst some of the respondents with internet access to find out about other places in the community where they could access computers for free and to find out about free courses on basic computer skills.



Part 2 – Respondents without regular internet access

In our study almost 1 in 4 respondents did not have regular access to the internet at home.

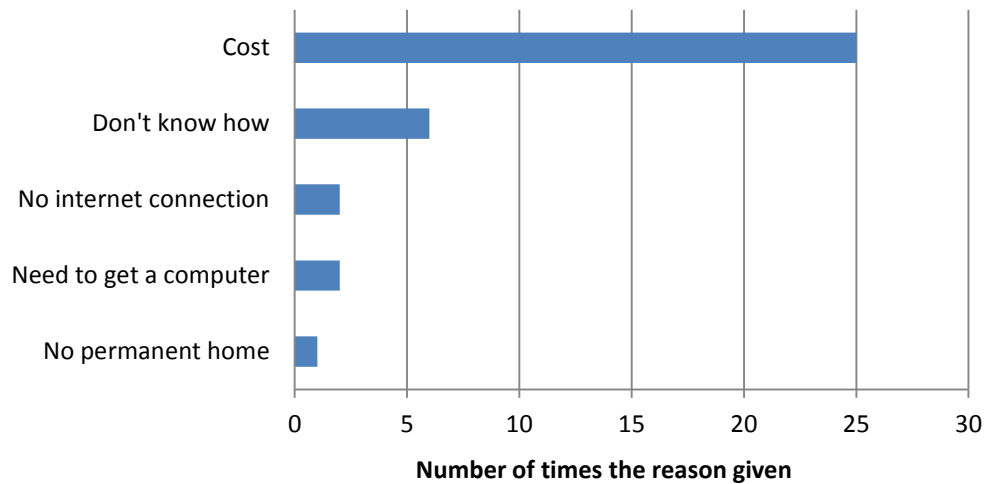


Of those, 4 out of 10 would like regular access.



Of those who **would like** internet access at home, cost was cited as the most significant factor preventing it (Chart 4).

Chart 4. Reasons why it is not possible to have regular internet access at home. Summary of the frequency of free entry responses given by those without access.



The following free text entries and case study are examples of what was said by those who would like regular internet access at home but don't think it is possible.



"Can't afford it and now my internet has been cut off."

"Not computer literate at the moment."

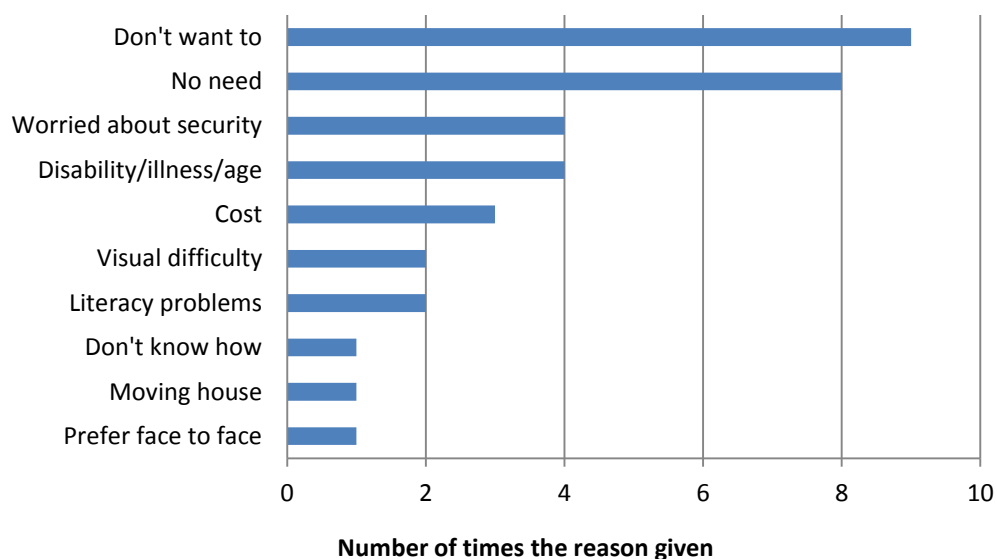
"Cost – Decorating and furniture more important."



Julie lives in a rural location and with mental health problems has a very poor internet connection. At times she cannot face going out, so when it's working, the internet keeps her in touch with the outside world. But when she has no service she feels very isolated and at times has gone without food when she could not place an on line order.

There were some respondents who **did not want** internet access at home and the following free entry reasons for this are shown (Chart 5). A general dislike of the internet, a perceived lack of need to go on line, concerns over security and restrictions due to disability predominate over concerns about cost. In the main, these reasons are different from those who **did** want internet access but felt it not possible.

Chart 5. Reasons why respondents do not want internet access at home. Summary of the frequency of 'free entry' responses given by those without access.



The following free text entries and case study are examples of responses given by those who **did not want** access to the internet at home.



"Not something that I feel I need in my life."

"At our age we do not trust it and don't want to be scammed."

"I am too ill to cope with it."

"I can't afford to buy one. I would not be able to afford the contract. I live in one room."

"Client is illiterate and cannot read. Also very poor eyesight and cannot read the screen."



Frances aged 83, in poor health and a low income, has never learned IT skills and feels disinclined to acquire them at her time of life. When phoning, she is often told to go on line and she says people can be quite rude when she declines. One told her that they didn't want to be bothered by people who wouldn't. This makes her feel lonely, sad and ostracized.

Like those respondents with regular internet access, there was a wish amongst some of the respondents without regular access to find out more about free access to computers and basic skills computer courses in the local community.



1 in 3 would like to know more about places in the community where you can access a computer for free



Just over 1 in 4 would like to find out more about free courses to improve their basic computer skills

Although some of our clients did not know this, all Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole libraries offer free access to the internet and, subject to demand, a computer can be used for one hour and sometimes longer. Computers can be booked in advance or you can just drop in. A free e-learning package, 'Learn My Way', which teaches basic computer skills is available and some libraries offer supported sessions to use it. All offer supported peer sessions at set times during the week run by the library service with volunteers or by other groups like Age UK or Magna Housing. It is possible to access a computer as a 'guest' without having a library card, provided you have proof of your name (e.g. a bus pass) and this also entitles you to book sessions and access the 'Learn My Way' resource.

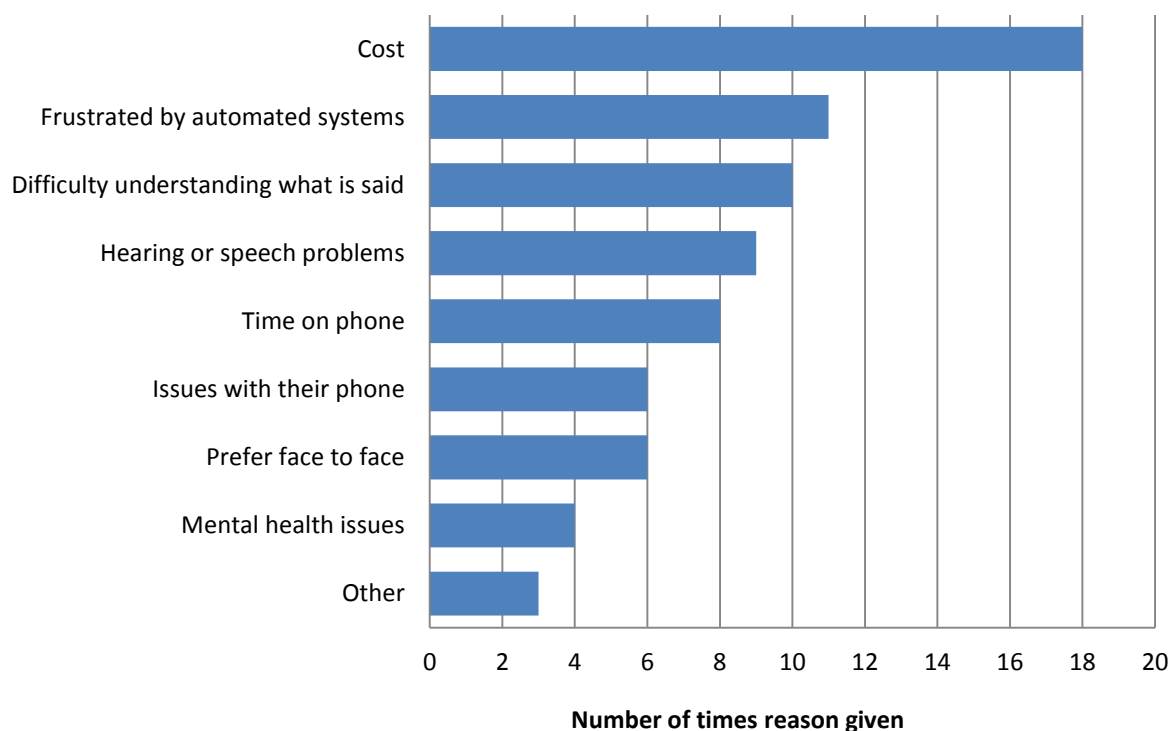
Staff at all the libraries we visited were willing to help people using a computer if they had the time although, understandably, some expressed discomfort at helping people to input personal information. A member of staff at one library said that despite their efforts the uptake on training courses was disappointing.

Access to computers and support at libraries has great potential but not all libraries are open every weekday and provision at present is limited. In addition, limited knowledge of available courses means that they are currently underutilised.

Part 3 - Access to Assisted Digital Support by phone

Because local and national government are required to provide assisted digital services (see page 6) we wanted to ask a question in this survey regarding how accessible assisted digital services were. The question focused on contact via the phone as this is probably the most used method of assisted digital support and was asked of all respondents, whether or not they had regular internet access. The responses are summarised in Chart 6 overleaf.

Chart 6. Reasons why access to some government services can be difficult by phone. Summary of the frequency of free entry responses.



The main issues about using a phone service were the cost and frustration of using automated systems. This is captured in the following comments.



"I only have a mobile and I worry about how much hanging on the line for a long time might cost me."

"Kept waiting too long and very expensive."

"It is a nightmare trying to discuss ANY problems with automated machine messages and very expensive and time consuming."

"Too many automated levels to go through before speaking to someone."

A number of respondents found it difficult to understand what the official was saying due to their perceived fast or indistinct speech, or the words they used. Below are examples of such comments.



"Understanding what they say or mean."

"Sometimes I can't recognise some unaccustomed word and can't recognise some accent. Sometimes they speak very fast."

"I get confused when they ask questions over the phone as they don't always explain themselves clearly."

These responses show that there is ample scope for service providers to improve ease of access to assisted digital support by phone and to improve the clarity with which it is delivered.

Part 4 – Respondents needing personalised Assisted Digital Support due to disabilities or long term health conditions

Of all our respondents, 5% indicated in their free entry responses that they had difficulties with communicating over the telephone. The reasons were predominantly to do with a disability; mostly hearing problems but also poor mental health, memory and comprehension.

Here are some examples of what people said.



“I have hearing problems and a persistent cough. I cannot understand them and they cannot understand me.”

“I struggle with contact at times because of my mental health”

“With my medical problems difficult to speak on the phone”

“I find it difficult remembering things short term and cannot easily fill in forms on computers or on the phone”

“My hearing is really poor – also they use words I don’t understand. I need face to face help.

“I have anxiety so talking on the phone is sometimes difficult.”

It is striking that although 5% of respondents overall had these difficulties, the rate was more than three times this for the group of respondents with no regular internet access. For this already excluded group, the rate was about 17%.

While more personalised and compassionate assisted digital support by phone might be sufficient for some of this group, greater help may be needed by others. In the Service Manual, the government gives three options of support; by phone, web chat or face to face. It would seem that some people in this group are in need of face to face support. And although some service providers may expect people to travel to the place of support, there will remain a small but significant number of people who are unable to travel and will need support in person in their homes by an advocate or an official.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Citizens Advice supports the development of digital services for the majority of the population. As our findings demonstrate 263 out of the 344 respondents have access to the internet and almost half of these respondents use the internet for a variety of transactions from banking to communication, shopping to making travel arrangements.

However there was also a significant group of clients who face barriers to accessing digital services. The evidence in this report has identified four key barriers:

1. Access to the internet;
2. Lacking confidence and skills to use the internet;
3. Frustrations with assisted digital services;
4. Specific individual barriers experienced by those clients with disabilities or long term health conditions.

To address these barriers, national and local organisations need to ensure there are systems and support services in place to:

1. **Improve internet access for people at home or in a convenient location**

Why – A quarter of our respondents did not have internet access and just under a third of ALL respondents wanted to know more about free internet access in the community. Cost seems to be a strong factor in deterring people from having internet access in their homes.

How -

- Continue the roll out of superfast broadband across all local authority areas
- Ask national Citizens Advice to research and campaign for reduction to the costs of broadband, especially where connectivity is poor
- Increase the availability of community hubs for free internet access e.g. community centres, village halls, libraries
- Publicise information about free local access to computers more widely. Local Citizens Advice may have a role in this

2. **Increase people's skills and knowledge so that they can become digitally active**

Why – Just under half of our respondents who have internet access only use it for limited types of transactions. Over a third of ALL respondents wanted to know more about free computer courses to improve basic computer skills. Concerns about internet security deter some people from using the internet.

How -

- Provide more free basic internet skills courses/support in local areas
- Encourage local authorities to continue initiatives such as digital champions
- Provide more training and information about how to keep secure online
- Provide information regarding security measures available to protect internet users when a user accesses any digital service
- Publicise information about basic digital skills courses/support more widely
Local Citizens Advice may have a role in this
- Use the data in the HeatMap to prioritise provision in certain areas

3. Improve assisted digital support over the phone for those who are not currently able to access digital services directly

Why – Some respondents found phone contact costly, time-consuming, frustrating and daunting. Some had difficulty understanding what an official was saying.

How -

- Make phone helplines free of charge
- Reduce the complexity of automated systems which require people to choose between options
- Train officials to better recognise and respond to callers to whom they should be speaking more slowly and clearly
- Train officials to use more easily understood words and to finish a call by summarising what has been said

4. Provide personalised alternatives to the small but significant proportion of people who are unable to access digital services nor use the phone easily due to a long term health condition or disability

Why – People without internet access are more likely to have significant difficulties communicating over the phone than people who have digital access. Their problems with the phone may well be due to disabilities. Severe disabilities may prevent them from travelling to access face to face assisted digital support.

How –

- Train officials to identify and respond compassionately to people with significant difficulties communicating over the phone
- Provide more places in the community where assisted digital support can be given face to face
- Be prepared to provide face to face support in people's homes or another convenient place in some cases

Digital Access Survey

Nowadays some organisations want to provide all their information and services digitally through the internet.



How does this affect you?

Please fill in this survey so we can see if the move to the internet is a problem and what can be done about it.

Part 4

Would you be interested finding out more about:

Places in the community where you can access a computer for free Yes No

Free courses to improve your basic computer skills Yes No

Information on this may be available from your local Citizens Advice

Now go to Part 5

Part 5

For people without the internet, some government services are available over the phone.

e.g. by speaking to a person and answering their questions, or by responding to automated questions.

Please tell us about any difficulties you might have with phone access:

.....
.....
.....

Part 6

Any other comments:

.....
.....
.....

Thank you! Please hand this sheet in to the receptionist

We help people find a way forward

Citizens Advice provides free, confidential and independent advice to help people overcome their problems.

We advocate for our clients and customers on the issues that matter to them.

We value diversity, champion equality and challenge discrimination.

We're here for everyone.

Dorset AdviceLine - 0344 245 1291

Citizens Advice Bournemouth & Poole

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Citizens Advice Christchurch

Citizens Advice Dorchester, Sherborne & Districts & North Dorset

Citizens Advice East Dorset

Citizens Advice Purbeck

Citizens Advice Weymouth & Portland

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