

## LECG Report on Digital Inclusion

The report follows a (Zoom) meeting of LECG, 29th January 2021. The purpose of the meeting was to exchange views and experiences

1. of digital access
2. the impact of inequalities
3. mitigating actions
4. LCC Digital Strategy, and if it is fit for purpose for its audience.

### 1. Experiences of digital access

National stats show 8% (4.3 million) have no basic digital skills; and 21% (11.3 million) have only limited awareness.

We need local stats because we need to know the range and scale of the problem (how extensive, how many groups, what are their specific needs and how might they best be helped) before we can plan appropriate solutions.

Project workers from Equality Action, a charity in Loughborough that works with disadvantaged individuals and communities, were told by parents that their children lacked laptops for home schooling; investigation revealed 163 children in five schools needed laptops. The organization put out a call on social media (also picked up on East Midlands Today) which has been very successful to date.

However, it is not only a matter of availability of kit such as laptops. It is apparent that broadband is not equally and always available across the city and county. Also, not all households have internet access or skills. Free WiFi is provided in only some places. Access to computers and other kit and to staff who can help in Libraries may be available to some, but not to all. This is of course made impossible by Covid-19 lockdown measures.

Older people frequently have no skills and experience using IT because it was brought in late in their working lives or was not relevant. Some have family help to set them up and support them, but many don't.

Even when people have a computer or some kind of kit and are relatively confident using it, things go wrong or they get stuck or software/apps are updated and changed. All these events can bring them to a halt and undermine their confidence. Users need access to a person who can help by giving explanations and demonstrations in words they can understand, at a speed they can follow, and in a setting they trust.

### 2. Impact of Inequalities

Contributors agreed that digital access and knowhow mirrors social inequalities, leaving the least well-off hugely disadvantaged. One gave examples: their campaigns to help

people with debt included paper leaflets that were distributed through food banks; Universal Credit does not cover the costs of IT, broadband and internet access; the difficulties faced by a single, working mum in a village with patchy broadband reception and no public transport.

Minority group members may have limited or no access in the ordinary way because of lack of skills and experience and of digital kit and difficulties with written (spoken, for some) English. The examples given showed that the difficulties were exacerbated during lockdown. We were told that minority group elders are finding it particularly difficult because so much information about Covid-19 and support services, and rules about social behaviour are provided online. They can't open it or use it, and in fact the language used is often impenetrable so they can't understand it.

Contributors agreed that lack of access exacerbates already existing inequalities, notably for those with financial problems, and that each reinforces the other. However, the issue must be considered holistically because lack of access has outcomes not only economically but also for social inclusion and personal well-being.

IT use helps people to be part of the community, to lead their lives better, to stay in touch with family and friends and to maintain or improve their quality of life. The lack of proper digital access means that people/families are substantially disadvantaged. They miss out on education, dealing with Government agencies such as the DWP, booking NHS and other appointments, dealing with the utilities, shopping if housebound, job search and applications ... we could go on. This leads us to say that ensuring access to IT is a collective responsibility so as to enable people to live their lives.

### **3. Mitigating Actions**

Videos provided in different languages, via WhatsApp, are intended to bring information to minority groups. However, they use professional language, not the everyday ordinary language that people use and understand easily. Translation is a tricky and complex problem and difficult to get right. Transcripts made digitally produce some weird and often funny results.

Comments from members on how the Census (due Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2021) will be achieved provided a case study or focus for concerns. Contributors raised and discussed the following issues: if it is run online, as proposed, then it will be patchy at best; not everyone can access an online version or get to places such as libraries where staff can help (and certainly not during Covid-19 lockdown); to whom and how would paper versions be distributed; and language barriers. Census officers are needed to go door to door to support – though social distance may preclude?

The issues highlighted in respect of the Census apply to all aspects of people's lives, as outlined above.

A range and variety of digital kit is available and can be provided in the home. A contributor outlined the successful arrangements that he had been able to make for an elderly member of his family who had no previous knowledge or experience. However, such provision is limited by the expense and whether family members have access to broadband and the internet, the knowledge to set it up and the availability and patience to support the user and to maintain it when it fails to perform as expected.

It was suggested that, ideally, kit for access with various ways of getting online and staff to support users, could be provided at a range and variety of places, such as libraries, surgeries and cafes.

One contributor described the success of community groups in which members supported and helped each other at a local level. She said it worked when help came from 'someone like you, not some techy whizz'. Such groups were a local self-help arrangement. She also pointed out that currently the groups can't meet because of Covid-19 so – ironically – the only help and training available currently is online.

#### **4. LCC Digital Strategy**

From members' comments we conclude that the County Strategy should acknowledge and engage with the following:

- Reliable broadband provision, internet access, kit and skills should be available to all
- The government's 'digital by default' strategy makes IT access, use and familiarity imperative if people are to be able to engage with government agencies and to exercise their rights as citizens
- People need to use IT to engage with their families, communities and wider society, and to live their lives fully
- Social and financial inequalities are mirrored and reinforced by differential access to IT, leaving the least well-off hugely disadvantaged
- Minority communities face additional problems such as language; people who are housebound are more reliant on access to IT
- Support and help for users should be from people they trust, in accessible (not 'techy') language, in places where they are comfortable.
- Support voluntary sector organisations such as Age UK Leicester shire & Rutland that provide digital assistance i.e.
  - Think Digital Program: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/leics/our-services/support-in-the-community/think-digital/>
  - Projects that address digital inclusion: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/discover/2019/october/digital-inclusion/>

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