

net benefits

older people and the internet

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Older people and the internet

"IT can transform the lives of older people, providing contacts, information, entertainment and access to specialised services. It can enable radical new models of health care and support for older people living at home, effecting savings that would amply repay the costs of installing an internet connection in every house, just like electricity, gas and water. But it requires profound changes in attitude - a belief in, and a belief by, older people that they can cope."

Tom Kirkwood¹

This paper is about older people and the internet. In the space of around twenty years the internet has gone from being something out of a science fiction book, to become a defining feature of communication and interaction in modern society. It has enabled significant changes in our methods of communication, shopping and obtaining information, and is becoming a key resource in public service provision. As such it has become a device viewed by many policy makers as an enabler of social inclusion.

Older people - aged 65 and above – use the internet relatively little in comparison to other age groups (14% of people aged over 65 compared to 57% of people aged 16 to 34). Although a personal choice for some, there are many who are restricted because of issues related to cost, complexity of technology and lack of relevance to individual lifestyles.

People without the internet share a similar profile with those who experience disadvantage in other areas of life, for example, they tend to be, people on a low income, the unemployed and older people. Older people stand out as a particular concern as they are likely to share some or all these characteristics, but are less likely than other groups to be able to change their social and economic status the older they get.

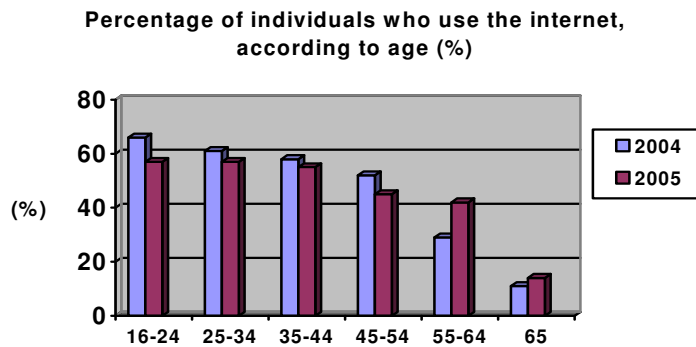
Enabling more people to use the internet and reducing barriers to use is the challenge that we face in a society that is growing more dependent on the internet.

¹ Tom Kirkwood *The end of Age* The Reith Lectures Radio 4 2001
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2001/lecture5.shtml>

Levels of internet access

Although recent data from the Welsh Consumer Council shows that personal use of the internet is lowest among older age groups, the number of older

people using the internet in their everyday lives is growing.



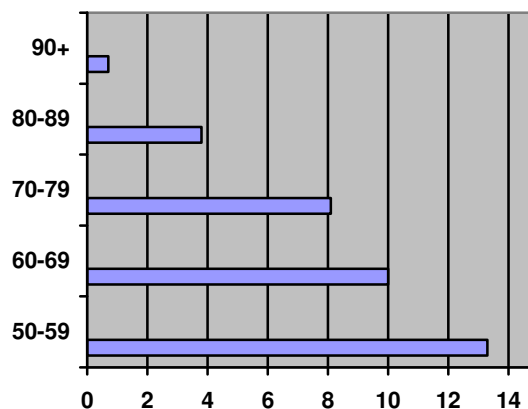
People aged over 55 have seen a bigger increase in internet use between

March 2004 and March 2005 than younger groups. People in the 55 to 64 age group have experienced the largest increase in internet use - up from 29% to 42%. People in the 65 and over age group have seen a steady increase - up from 11% to 14%, (in contrast to younger groups who have seen a decrease in internet use) but still remain significantly lower than other groups.²

Older people in Wales

Like most other countries in the developed world the population of Wales is ageing. People aged 50 and above make up over a third (35.9%) of the general population in Wales, with people aged over 60 making up nearly a quarter (22.7%) and people over 80 making up just over one in twenty (4.5%).³

Older people as a percentage of population in Wales (%)
Source: Census 2001



² For more information on rates of internet and broadband connections, see Welsh Consumer Council (2005) *Internet Inequality in Wales: update 2005*

³ Census 2001, cited by Age Concern Cymru *Older People in Wales*

Older people constitute a significant and growing proportion of society with widely different social and economic backgrounds and interests. Even definitions of 'older people' can vary, ranging from 50 and over for the Welsh Assembly Government's Older People's Strategy, 60 and over which will be used by the Older People's Commissioner when appointed, to 75 and over when discussing health issues. This report refers loosely to people aged 65 and over.

Making the internet a 'part of life'

Without suggesting that the internet is the solution to all problems, it does provide the opportunity to access a range of services and activities. Many organisations and individuals have realised the potential of the internet as a method of social interaction and communication. And just as televisions and telephones came to dominate mainstream technology in the latter half of the twentieth century, the internet is quickly becoming a dominant feature of the twenty-first century.

The challenge we face is to ensure that older people who want to use the internet are able to do so, and that those who are unsure about going 'online' are shown the benefits which are relevant to the personal and social aspects of their lives.

For example, younger people are more likely to use the internet in work and have friends who use it, and can perform activities that are socially relevant to their age group. Older people are less likely to have this 'peer' support to use the internet, hence highlighting the benefits can be more complex.

This section points out some of the areas where the internet can be useful in the lives of older people.

Public services

In terms of accessing public services, the internet is becoming one of the major channels of communication used by service providers. Governments in Cardiff and Westminster are increasingly referring to the role of the internet in their reports and strategies, and emphasising the benefits to citizens of going online.

The draft National Service Framework for Older People in Wales highlights the importance of appropriate information for older people and acknowledges that efforts should be made to improve older people's access to information technology.⁴

The increasing role of the internet is also referred to in the key Welsh Assembly Government document *Informing Healthcare*.⁵

"We live in the Information Age. For the first time in history any of us can interrogate the database of medicine directly through the Internet rather than through doctors. That technical innovation has itself created the conditions for profound social change. It has altered the balance of power between doctor and patient - in favour of the patient - forever."

Encouraging all sections of society to use the internet for this purpose is part of the Welsh Assembly Government's *Making the Connections* programme of

Information on local authority services is available online, and e-mail addresses are supplied for most departments making it easier to contact the right department (staff are often able to forward e-mails to the right person). It also saves arranging transport into council offices in town centres, being put on hold for long periods of time on the telephone, and having to venture out of the house if the weather is bad.

public service reform. Older people are traditionally part of the group referred to as heavy users of public and welfare services, which include social housing, social care and health care support.⁶ As such they have a large amount to gain from being able to access public services online.

⁴ Consultation draft National Service Framework for Older People in Wales p. 35

⁵ Welsh Assembly Government (2003) *Informing Healthcare* transforming healthcare using information and IT

⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2004) *Internet use in sheltered housing*, and Consultation draft National Service Framework for Older People in Wales p. 9

There is concern among some older people⁷ that increasing focus on the internet as a method of communication will mean less face-to-face services, and replacement of traditional forms of social provision. The Welsh Assembly Government is currently committed to point out that money saved by providing services online will be re-directed into face-to-face contact channels which are typically more expensive services to provide.

Communication

E-mails can enable easy communication with friends and family, and once the initial purchase of the computer equipment and internet connection have been taken into account, can be a cost effective and quick method of keeping in touch. Communicating via the internet also means that e-mails can be sent any time of day or night, anywhere in the world. E-mails can be easy to write, can be written in stages and saved, re-drafted and even printed out for future reference.

Research shows that over half of people (53%) with e-mail in the 65 and over age range say that they now contact friends and family more than they did before they had e-mail – when they used only postcards and letters.⁸

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation also shows that older people are using e-mail for sending and receiving photos, and many have invested in equipment for 'scanning' photos onto their computers.⁹

Shopping

Shopping online is popular activity among the general population, with a growing proportion of these being older consumers. A total of two out of three (61%) people who use the internet shopped online between March 2004 and 2005.

⁷ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2004) Internet use in sheltered housing

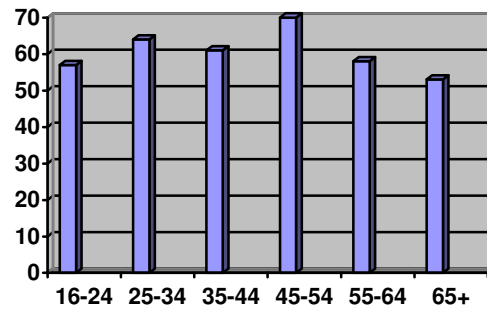
⁸ Welsh Consumer Council (2004) Omnibus Survey

⁹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2004) Internet use in sheltered housing

Over half (53%) of people aged 65 and over who use the internet shop online, which despite being lower than younger groups is still a substantial amount.¹⁰

Shopping online can offer convenience and cost efficiency, and provide the opportunity to shop around for the best deals. Many websites also offer free delivery which can benefit people with limited mobility, those without access to a car, and for people doing large amounts of shopping

Have you shopped online or bought anything on the internet over the last 12 months? by age (%)



Base: People who use the internet

Many people don't like the experience of shopping online, either because they

Online transactions are covered by the Distance Selling Regulations. Consumers may find that they have additional right to the high street -as long as basic rules are followed. For example, always use a secure website – look for the padlock logo – and only ever give your card details over a secure link, not through an e-mail. Your credit card company usually covers you if things go wrong, and any fraudulent use is likely to be refunded.

see it as a substitute for physical activity and social contact¹¹ or because they don't trust the security of shopping online.

Consumers who shop online can enhance their online security by following some basic rules¹². Consumer Direct and local Trading Standards offices are able to provide advice on how to shop securely.

Most high street shops and some smaller local shops now offer an internet shopping service, which can support the high street by providing the opportunity to do research online and then visit the shop to buy the item in person.

¹⁰ Welsh Consumer Council (2005) Shopping on the Internet Based on a small sample size for age 65 and over

¹¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2004) Internet use in sheltered housing

¹² See Welsh Consumer Council (2005) Internet Shopping: the consumer perspective

Information

The internet is a valuable source of information and can assist lifelong learning and social inclusion.

Research conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation¹³ shows that many older people use the internet for information. This can range from information on family trees (which is growing in popularity as a past-time among older people), on savings and pensions, or to check what day the bins are collected.

Looking up health complaints online is also a popular use of the internet. There is a wide range of sources offering health information online, however the validity of some websites can be uncertain. It is advisable that a reputable website is used¹⁴ and that information is cross-referenced.

Problems to overcome

"The biggest single change has been the astonishing advance in information technology - computers, mobile phones, and the like. This has had the potential to revolutionise the lives of older people, but the fact is that the oldest age groups have so far benefited least from IT.

Tom Kirkwood¹⁵

While the internet is optimistically viewed by many as a potential for technologically skilled people to overcome the 'digital divide', there are still a number of factors such as education and socio-economic status that impact on many older people's ability to go online. These include barriers related to:

- Cost
- Education/Complexity of computer technology

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ For more information see Welsh Consumer Council (2005) In sickness and in health: consumer access to health information

¹⁵ Tom Kirkwood *The end of Age* The Reith Lectures Radio 4 2001

- Appropriate locations to use the internet
- Accessibility of websites

Cost

As referred to earlier, older people are a diverse group and have greatly differing needs. While some people have sufficient savings or personal pension for a comfortable retirement, others live in relative poverty, dependent on a basic state pension. Because of this many older people have to budget, and paying for internet access and computer equipment is unlikely to be a priority when the budget is tight.

Pensioner couples in Wales receive £294 per week, £329 in Britain

Single pensioners in Wales receive £164 net, £173 in Britain
Age Concern Cymru

Long-term contracts can be off-putting, where a person can find themselves obligated to pay for an internet connection for twelve months without even knowing if they are going to enjoy or be able to use it.

Complexity of computer technology

For people with little or no previous experience with computers, a lack of up-to-date computer skills or difficulty in acquiring them can seem like insurmountable barriers from the outset. Even people who have an internet connection in their household may not use it because of a low level of technological competence, lack of motivation or opportunity to ask for help.

'Meet the Mouse/Llywio'r Llygoden' is a national initiative run by the Welsh Assembly Government to provide citizens with the basic skills necessary to search the internet and use e-mail. Courses are aimed at older people, and between April 2004 and March 2005 1,935 people attended 166 workshops in 41 locations across Wales. Feedback continues to be positive, with 42% of participants going on to further training

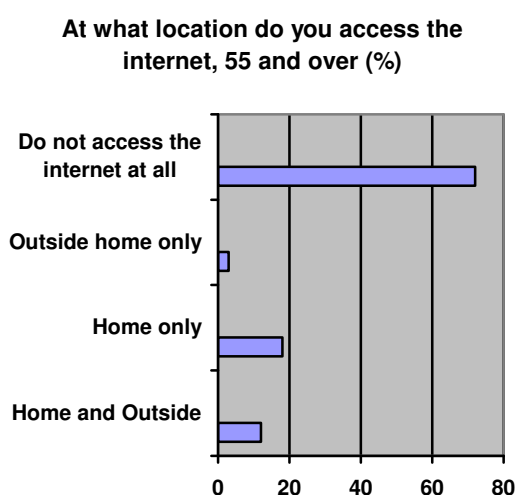
Many older people aged over 65 have had little contact with computers during their working lives and do not share younger people's experience of

computers. Friends and family can be an essential source of information on how to use them.

Educational courses should aim to provide education in what older people want, and to make learning relevant and fun. Courses run by organisations such as the Welsh Assembly Government and Learn Direct are proving successful in providing people who have little existing internet knowledge with basic internet skills such as e-mail that they are able to use.

Appropriate locations to use the internet

Like younger people, older people are more likely to use the internet at home than at locations outside the home. Although there are several locations that provide internet access in community settings, these are not always appropriate. Libraries and community halls can be intimidating for the new user, and public access locations can be inappropriate if privacy or confidentiality is needed.



Research from the Welsh Consumer Council¹⁶ shows that most people using the internet in locations outside the home already have a connection at home. This suggests that internet access in community settings is being used more as a supplementary method of access rather than a main method.

¹⁶ Welsh Consumer Council (2005) Internet Inequality in Wales: update 2005

Lack of suitably designed equipment and websites

"Apart from personal emergency alarms, IT products are directed towards the young. Display fonts are small, buttons fiddly, options complicated."

Tom Kirkwood¹⁷

As part of the ageing process, some people may find that the quality of their health deteriorates. According to the General Household Survey (2000) 57% of people aged 65 to 74 and 64% of people aged 75 and over had reported a long-standing illness¹⁸. This could include poor eyesight or mobility problems such as arthritis. These can make using computers and the internet problematic; however, there are ways that it can adapt to meet their needs.

One of the best features of the internet is that, as a new technology, it is relatively easy to address any problems and to come up with suggestions for improvement. One of the worst features is that new technology is hardly ever targeted at older people - it is marketed towards younger users who pass it on to other groups as it becomes more widely used and is replaced by newer technology. As such it is hardly ever designed around the needs of specific groups such as people who are partially sighted.¹⁹

Development in software design over recent years has enabled people with physical barriers to overcome the problems of bad computer and website design. However, this should not be an excuse for websites with small print and poor navigation tools. The Disability Rights Act makes it illegal to discriminate against a disabled person when providing services. In a recent investigation,

Organisations such as the Royal National Institute for the Blind and the Disability Rights Commission can offer advice on equipment such as screen readers, screen magnifiers, or alternatives to using a mouse.

¹⁷ Tom Kirkwood *The end of Age* The Reith Lectures Radio 4 2001

¹⁸ General Household Survey (2000)

¹⁹ D.A. Norman (1998) *The invisible computer: Why good products can fail, the personal computer is so complex, and information appliances are the solution.*

the Disability Rights Commission found that 81 per cent of British Websites are inaccessible to disabled people.²⁰

A growing number of businesses are become more tuned on to people's needs, and are designing websites with flexible font sizes and clearly laid out site maps.

Summary and Recommendations

This report has shown that, while the internet is of growing importance as a means of communication and way of accessing goods and services, barriers including cost, training and difficulties in adjusting to new technology, can make the internet less accessible for some older people.

There are, of course, no easy "solutions". And many people will continue living perfectly satisfactory lives without reference to the internet or what it can deliver. But, given the place of the internet in society today, and the increasing use of it by providers of information, goods and services, it is important to address barriers that may prevent people accessing the internet. Only once these barriers have been addressed can consumers make an informed decision about whether or not to use the internet.

Key issues are cost, training, and dealing with new technology.

Cost

While recognising that the price of computers have fallen in recent years from around £1000 to as low as £250, it still remains a significant outlay, particularly for those unsure of the benefits.

²⁰ www.drc.org.uk/newsroom/newsdetails.asp?id=954§ion=1

Cost can be a barrier in two ways: first, for those on a low income, for whom even the new lower price of computers may be prohibitive. Second, for those who may be able to afford a computer, but without having one to “learn” on, remain unconvinced that the expenditure is worthwhile.

Ways to approach the issue of cost include charities for older people exploring:

- The possibilities of bulk purchase of machines, to resell at low cost
- The use made of public access terminals in libraries and other centres
- The provision of free access terminals in older people’s centres and meeting places
- The provision of, and more effective promotion of induction classes in use of the internet for older and other people
- Using magazines, radio and TV to encourage people with computer experience to share their skills and knowledge with older people in a peer environment, as well as sharing access to their computers.

Maintenance

Related to the issue of capital cost are issues around ongoing maintenance. Here again, there are no simple answers. But creative approaches by organisations for and of older people, such as encouraging those with skills to offer them voluntarily, and providing free or low-cost help lines, as well as maintaining information to point people in the direction of where help is available, they will contribute to create a more inclusive approach to the internet and information technology.

Understanding the user

Finally, if the internet is to be made more inclusive, and if the particular needs of older people are to be recognised, it is incumbent on providers to take the lead in routinely questioning, surveying and interrogating their users and the way they provide services for their users, to ensure that they are doing so in the most appropriate way. Many people, including older people can be put off the internet by poorly designed websites, use of inappropriate technical

language, and navigation systems which are, at the least, difficult to understand.

Community care staff, home carers and front line staff who have basic computer skills, or who are prepared to undergo training in basic computer skills, can be a resource for sharing skills with their clients. Local authorities and Local Health Boards should examine the opportunities for capitalising on this valuable community based resource.

Appendix – Beaufort Omnibus Survey

Fieldwork was subcontracted to Beaufort Research Ltd of Cardiff using the Beaufort Welsh Omnibus survey.

The Omnibus survey is designed to be representative of the adult population resident in Wales aged 16 and over. The primary sampling unit is Unitary Authority. Within unitary authority a series of sampling points is selected such that a minimum of 68 interviewing points throughout the Principality is selected with probability proportional to resident population.

Within each sampling point, interlocking quota controls of age and social class within sex are employed for the selection of respondents.

Quotas are set to reflect the demographic profile of Welsh residents and no more than one person per household is interviewed. A fresh sample is selected for each survey within substantially the same interviewing locations.

Interviews are conducted face to face in the homes of respondents. Beaufort's experienced fieldworkers are used with postal and telephone back-checking in accordance with BS7911.

A total of 1001 interviews were completed between the period of 3rd – 10th March 2005 and subsequently analysed.

Regions used in presenting data comprised of groups of unitary authority as listed below:

North Wales

Wrexham, Flintshire, Denbighshire, Conwy, Anglesey, Gwynedd;

Mid West Wales

Powys, Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire;

West South Wales

Swansea, Neath & Port Talbot, Bridgend;

Cardiff & South East Wales

Cardiff, Vale of Glamorgan, Torfaen, Monmouthshire, Newport;

Valleys

Caerphilly, Merthyr, Blaenau Gwent, Rhondda Cynon Taff.