

Consultation Response

Ref 3015

Culture, Media and Sport Committee inquiry into establishing world-class connectivity throughout the UK

September 2015

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Phil Mawhinney and David Steele
phil.mawhinney@ageuk.org.uk

Age UK
Tavis House
1-6 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9NA
T 0800 169 80 80 F 020 3033 1000
E policy@ageuk.org.uk
www.ageuk.org.uk

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1-6 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9NA.

About this consultation

The Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee monitors the policy, administration and expenditure of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on behalf of the House of Commons and the electorate. It is inviting written evidence for its inquiry into the coverage, delivery and performance of superfast broadband in the UK.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Age UK is the country's largest charity dedicated to helping everyone make the most of later life. We believe in a world where everyone can love later life and we work every day to achieve this. We help more than 5m people every year, providing support, companionship and advice for older people who need it most.
- 1.2 Age UK welcomes the progress made by the Government in delivering superfast broadband coverage (hereby referred to as 'coverage') and the aim to provide 95 per cent of UK premises with coverage by the end of 2017. We agree that coverage is currently inadequate and argue that this causes exclusion and harm to some older people. Our main point in this submission relates to the need for a universal service obligation for broadband.
- 1.3 Many older people are at particular risk of being digitally excluded, being more likely to live in rural and isolated areas without good coverage. This means they can struggle to reliably access essential services like banking, as well as other services around social care and social connectedness. As part of extending coverage, the Government must ensure older people are fully digitally included.

2. Supporting digital skills

- 2.1 Some older people are happy with 'life offline' and have no interest in going online. They must be able to access essential (and other) services in a way suits them. Otherwise there is a danger that people will be left behind in an increasingly digital world.
- 2.2 Some older people could go online with appropriate support and training to build their digital skills and confidence. Without this support, many people simply will not use the internet. The Government should therefore have a coherent, long-term strategy on digital connectivity and skills, including support for voluntary organisations to provide this digital support. Barriers that need to be addressed include: getting people interested, providing appropriate tailored training, ensuring follow-up help and support, tackling concerns about security, and giving advice about equipment and costs.

3. Older people – rural residents, mixed digital skills

- 3.1 Many older people live in rural areas. People aged 65+ make up 23 per cent of the rural population, compared to 17 per cent of England as a whole.¹ In future, rural areas will contain a higher proportion of 'older old' people – the 85+ population is set to increase by 186 per cent by 2028, compared to a 149 per cent rise in the UK as a whole.²

- 3.2 Older people are less likely to use the internet than younger groups – 52 per cent of people aged 65+ ‘go online anywhere’, compared to 84 per cent of those aged 55-64 and over 90 per cent of all other adults.³ However, this is still a significant proportion (over half of over 65s) and the trend is for increasing numbers of older people to use the internet. Many older people already rely on the internet. One man we spoke to told us ‘I cannot live without it. It was cut off for two days earlier this year, and it was like not having electricity.’⁴
- 3.3 While there will be some people who remain offline – for whom there must remain alternative options – the rural population of older people in future will have more digital skills than at present. Therefore, it is vital that rural areas have adequate coverage to enable people to access services. Feedback received by Age UK for our forthcoming report on digital inclusion and exclusion reveals frustration among some older people with the poor broadband access in the area where they live, particularly in rural areas.

4. Independence, health and care

- 4.1 The Government should examine the role Internet Service Providers can play in helping older people with a range of issues, including health, telecare, loneliness and banking.
- 4.2 The Government’s vision for health and care is for more people to stay independent at home for as long as possible. The Health Secretary recently outlined the aim for people to access their health records online.⁵ Adequate connectivity is essential to make this vision a reality. The challenge will grow over time – the number of people aged 65+ with social care needs in rural England is set to increase by 70 per cent over the next 20 years.⁶
- 4.3 Digital technology such as telehealth – where patients monitor their own conditions through home-based or wearable devices connected to the internet – could enable local clinicians, families and carers to remotely support people in their homes and reduce the need for referrals to acute centres for routine care.
- 4.4 The internet also enables people with mobility or health problems to purchase food and groceries online for home delivery. This is particularly important in rural areas where public transport is often not available. One man told us: ‘Having become disabled I have found it a godsend to be able to carry on shopping for anything I want.’

5. Tackling loneliness

- 5.1 Being online can have positive impacts on people who are lonely. Over 1 million older people say they always or often feel lonely.⁷ This includes those in rural areas who live far from friends or family, as well as people unable to leave the home to socialise. This impacts people’s health – loneliness can be as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.⁸
- 5.2 The internet allows people to stay in touch with others, including face-to-face conversations by Skype. Although it is not clear-cut, the weight of evidence shows that internet use helps older people combat social isolation and there is some evidence of its positive effects on loneliness.⁹ One respondent to an Age UK survey said: ‘Skype is

amazing – I can talk to my son and daughter in Australia and New Zealand at no cost, and see them. It makes them feel so much nearer.¹⁰

6. Banking

6.1 Banking is an essential service. Online banking is increasing among older people – 32 per cent of internet users aged 55+ now bank or pay bills online, up from 21 per cent in 2005.¹¹ However, older people in rural areas need more reliable coverage to conduct basic, everyday banking. One person in Abergavenny, Monmouthshire, told us their online transactions were frequently disrupted: ‘It stops mid transaction and I have to start again.’

6.2 In the context of bank branch closures, post offices and mobile banks) provide the only physical means of banking in some rural communities. These are a lifeline for people lacking the health, mobility or resources to travel to branches in local towns. At times they work well but they are unreliable; we know of instances where they have failed to get an internet connection, leaving people unable to carry out basic transactions.

7. Government services, claiming entitlements

7.1 As the Government makes a range of important services ‘digital by default’ – including voter registration, carer’s allowance and lasting power of attorney¹² – it is simply essential that adequate coverage reaches all areas of the country. As more key services become digital by default¹³ the case for universal coverage becomes even stronger.

8. Extreme weather

8.1 Better coverage would enable people in rural areas at risk of floods and storms to access information and warnings, practically prepare and communicate with others for help.

9. Research and development

9.1 In terms of Research and Development (R&D), the Government should explore solutions to other challenges that prevent older people, including those with disabilities, from being digitally included. R&D should develop innovations in identification verification – a major challenge for some people with physical disabilities – and security from scams/fraud. Indeed, online scams are a major risk – data from the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau indicates that well over £670 million was lost to the ten biggest online scams in 2014.¹⁴

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https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/443228/Statistical_Digest_of_Rural_England_2015_June_edition_v2.pdf

² Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, for Cabinet Office, 2009

³ http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/media-lit-10years/2015_Adults_media_use_and_attitudes_report.pdf

⁴ More information about the position and views of older internet users and non-users will be available in a forthcoming Age UK report.

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/health-secretary-outlines-vision-for-use-of-technology-across-nhs>

⁶ Cabinet Office, ‘Working together for older people in rural areas’, 2009

⁷ *One Voice: Shaping our ageing society*, Age Concern and Help the Aged, 2009

⁸ *Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review*. Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB. *PLoS Med* 2010;7(7)

⁹ Lelkes, O (2013) ‘Happier and Less Isolated: Internet Use in Old Age’, *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* Vol. 21 (1): pp.33-36.

¹⁰ Forthcoming Age UK report on digital exclusion

¹¹ http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/media-lit-10years/2015_Adults_media_use_and_attitudes_report.pdf

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/transformation>

¹³ http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/media-lit-10years/2015_Adults_media_use_and_attitudes_report.pdf

¹⁴ <http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/news/article-2801328/top-ten-online-scams-fraudsters-stole-victim-s-money-conned-facebook-friends-too.html>