# How can we make the digital world more accessible to older people?

*On Friday, 17 September 2021, we hosted our first in-person event since the start of March 2020. Following our publication [On Digital Inequalities](#), the event brought together stakeholders from different sectors to share expertise and thought leadership on how to address digital inequalities, particularly focusing on the challenges faced by older people.*

*The panellists included Andy Burnham (Mayor of Greater Manchester), Adam Micklethwaite (Director of Partnerships and Fundraising, Good Things Foundation), Professor Chris Todd (Professor of Primary Care and Community Health, The University of Manchester) and Dr Sophie Yarker (Research Associate, The University of Manchester). The panel was chaired by our Academic Co-Director Professor Francesca Gains. The following notes summarise the discussion that took place.*

Professor Francesca Gains began by highlighting the scale of digital inequalities in the UK – latest data from the Office for National Statistics shows that [half of over-75s (around 2.5 million people) have never accessed the internet](#). Crucially, access to digital and internet services depends on a range of factors including resources, technical knowledge, skills and confidence to use these services.

Following this introduction, the first panel speaker, Professor Chris Todd, underscored the uneven distribution in digital services – the people lacking access to digital and internet services are more likely to be older, poorer and female. Over [one in seven people in the UK](#) do not use internet services, and these figures are higher among marginalised communities. He pointed out that **some of the problems that disproportionately affect marginalised groups, such as the lack of access to digital equipment and skills, poor connectivity, and the lack of digital infrastructure in deprived regions, have persisted despite innovations brought about by the digital revolution** in the last 18 months. Social determinants (age, gender, socioeconomic status, neighbourhood, etc.) influence individuals' access to digital services.

Professor Chris Todd proceeded to put forward a quick manifesto from his research, in which he emphasised the need to **work with older people to co-design and co-produce interventions that directly address barriers facing older and marginalised communities**. He also cited the [Keeping Well At Home](#) campaign as an example of a successful intervention co-created with older people.

In addition to co-production, **ongoing digital skills training, communicating the tangible benefits of digital services to older people, increasing the accessibility and affordability of equipment, removing barriers to data connectivity, and encouraging lifelong learning to futureproof digital skills and tackle digital inequalities** were some of the other suggestions proposed by Professor Chris Todd. He concluded by highlighting

that since digital is here to stay, it is vital to ensure that digital services enhance healthy lives.

The next panellist, Adam Micklethwaite, continued the discussion by highlighting that the COVID-19 pandemic changed everything and nothing. While 1.5 million more people are online since the start of the pandemic, national figures reveal that [2.6 million people are still completely offline](#) and [14.9 million have very low digital engagement](#). Adam emphasised the reasons behind digital exclusion are personal, contextual and situational. **Solutions to address digital exclusion should be scalable and personalised, taking into account the multiple barriers facing every individuals.**

Adam also highlighted the benefits of working with small community organisations that have cultivated close working relationships with older people, and adopting a flexible, people-centric and holistic approach to embed digital services. Furthermore, he argued that a cross-sector approach that promotes **partnerships across the private, public and voluntary sectors will be crucial to spearhead innovative solutions, bearing in mind funding and time constraints.** Finally, Adam also stressed the importance of cultivating **patience in policy approaches**, since it is important to recognise that building digitally inclusive services and imparting digital training is a long-term process which takes time.

Dr Sophie Yarker, the next speaker, shared findings from her work as a member of the [Manchester Urban Ageing Research Group](#), which promotes 'age-friendly' urban environments. Dr Yarker's research project explored how older people who were already facing social exclusion prior to COVID-19, were impacted by the pandemic. For this research, 102 participants were interviewed at three points during the pandemic to document how access to technology services shaped the experiences of older people.

Dr Yarker stated that the 44 participants who were non-users or occasional users (in the sample group) reported a decline in their overall wellbeing and increased social exclusion. However, other participants who used technology reported fatigue after the first and second interviews. Based on the preliminary findings, Dr Yarker highlighted that the **trajectory for the uptake of technology is not linear; hence, policy measures should factor in fatigue and resistance to new technological developments.**

She also reiterated some of the points raised by Professor Todd, highlighting that the digital barriers facing marginalised communities were largely structural. She suggested that these challenges can be overcome through a community-oriented approach by mapping the connections between digital and social infrastructures. Importantly, **digital infrastructure is part of the wider physical infrastructure.** Hence, adopting a localised approach by working with communities that already have a strong knowledge of barriers faced by older people would connect digital communities with social communities.

The final speaker of the event – the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham – remarked that this was a pivotal moment to have a conversation on bridging the digital divide, as the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified social and digital inequalities. He also stated that addressing the digital divide demonstrates the importance of devolution powers. Reflecting on the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on the North, he pointed out that residents in the least affluent regions lacked access to the basics – secure income, decent

housing, connectivity (transport and digital) – which put them in a precarious position and also contributed to a higher case and mortality rate compared to the rest of the UK.

Andy Burnham highlighted that access to digital connectivity is increasingly being recognised as a basic human right and a top-priority issue especially in public services. He emphasised that public service providers need to bear the additional responsibility of ensuring that people who are in most need of services – for instance, primary and social care – are able to access them online and adapt to digital services.

The Mayor also discussed initiatives such as the [Digital Inclusion Action Network](#) and the [Independent Inequalities Commission](#) which have been created to reduce inequalities and support communities that are at risk of being left behind in the digital revolution, such as under-25s, over-75s and disabled people. As Manchester sets its vision to become a leading digital city in the UK, he argued that **the goal of becoming a digital hub cannot be achieved until every resident has access to basic income, housing, and digital connectivity.**

The panel discussion was followed by a short round of questions and comments from the audience and livestream attendees.

One question from a livestream member was: even once digital services are extended to older people, how can we ensure that digital access is maintained over time? Another audience member commented that **primary care is the gateway to older people's access to digital services** and should be prioritised within policy to accelerate digital inclusion in the city region. There were also suggestions from audience members, including the possibility of **setting up volunteer networks on digital platforms such as WhatsApp to help older residents resolve any immediate digital issues**.

In response to these questions and comments, the panellists agreed that increased support and investment were central to reimagining models in the public sector. Below are some of the final or key points made by the speakers.

Adam voiced the importance of thinking about the barriers that people might face – the reasons they cannot carry on using digital services, and how measures can be implemented to ensure that older people have access to peer support in person. In short, sustaining community infrastructure alongside digital infrastructure is vital. He also highlighted that funding represents a huge challenge, making it necessary that organisations maximise funding streams by building changes within existing social infrastructure to promote wellbeing.

Dr Sophie Yarker expressed that having a community or neighbourhood support group could help maintain digital access as older people would have a support group to ask for help when they face any issues. Importantly, she underscored that digital inclusion should not be prioritised at the expense of social inclusion.

Professor Chris Todd emphasised that co-production of digital services with older people would be essential to maintain their accessibility over time. He also recommended **data-free**

**access to essential websites** could be beneficial to enhance data accessibility for certain essential services.

Andy Burnham stated that **GMCA is committed to getting all under-25s, over-75s and disabled people online to bridge the digital divide and prevent future digital inequalities in the region.**

He remarked that **reverse mentoring or intergenerational mentoring could be encouraged by rewarding young people for promoting digital skills learning among older people.** For instance, schemes such as Our Pass (free bus travel for 16-18 year olds) and provision of free music and sports tickets could encourage more young people to volunteer in schemes that connect younger and older generations.

He also acknowledged the importance of embedding digital services in the primary care sector and highlighted the benefits of promoting a Live Well Service across Greater Manchester to tackle digital inequalities alongside social and health inequalities.

The Mayor highlighted that **to build back better from the pandemic, it is vital that everyone has access to the basics – good secure work, decent safe housing, transport and digital connectivity.** Getting all residents online – particularly younger, older and disabled people – is a core mission for Greater Manchester to realise its ambition of being the best place to grow up, get on and grow old.