

Evidence Briefing / November 2025



Digital Exclusion and Social Care: Evidence Briefing

Professor Kate Hamblin and Dr. Grace Whitfield

SUMMARY

Our daily lives increasingly require us to 'go online' to access information, services, support and leisure. In the public sector, there is a focus on the ways **digitalisation can enhance services**- for example, the NHS 10 year plan¹ has an emphasis on 'analogue to digital' with the NHS app, and with recent debates around Digital ID cards.

Social care is no different - social care services and provision are increasingly encouraged by policy initiatives, such as the funding for Digital Social Care Records, to use digital devices and systems.²

However, **the shift towards digital across public services is held back by digital exclusion**. Understanding the causes of digital exclusion and how to support digital inclusion is vital to ensure people can access the social care support and other public services they need.

WHAT IS DIGITAL EXCLUSION?

In the UK, **1.7 million households have no mobile or broadband internet** at home and around **2.4 million people are unable to complete a single basic task to get online**, such as opening an internet browser.³

We know **certain groups in the population are more likely to be digitally excluded**. 'Limited users' of online technology are

- around 4 times more likely to be from low income households
- 8 times more likely to be over 65 years old
- 1.5 times more likely to be from ethnic minority backgrounds.⁴

Disabled people may also be digitally excluded: 92% of non-disabled adults use the internet compared with 67% of disabled people, and smartphone usage also varies - 53% of disabled people own a smartphone compared with 81% of non-disabled people.⁵

However, **an intersectional approach is needed** which considers how the combination of personal characteristics and structural disadvantage together shape the experience of digital exclusion.

Geography matters too, as some areas are poorly served by Broadband, 4G and 5G connectivity, Rural communities face particular challenges, with additional costs - often referred to as 'the rural premium'.⁶

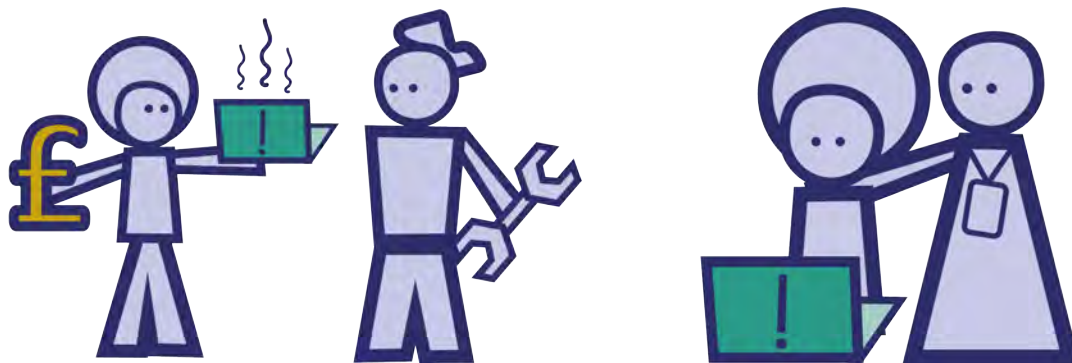
UNPAID CARERS AND DIGITAL EXCLUSION: CENTRE FOR CARE RESEARCH

The causes of digital exclusion are attributed to issues of **affordability, access and ability** (Ofcom, 2022). Centre for Care research with carers explored these issues but also highlighted other challenges carers face as services they use shift towards digital.^{7,8}

Affordability and costs are a primary driver of digital poverty, with low-income households hit hardest.⁹ Many unpaid carers involved in Centre for Care research used digital devices and systems to support them in their caring role – to access health and care online booking systems and appointments, for information and advice – but felt technology ‘moved quickly’ and devices often needed replacing.^{7,8} Broadband and mobile data packages were costly and some carers were not aware of the social tariffs offered by some telecommunications providers to people on low incomes or Universal Credit.

Other factors impede **access**. Work by Centre for Care associates¹⁰ to create a ‘[Digital Poverty Heatmap](#)’ for South Yorkshire [overlays](#) data related to connectivity with other data that reflects which groups in the local population are most likely to experience digital exclusion, factoring in areas of high levels of poor health and unpaid carers. In the Care Matters podcast mini-series on [Digital Care Futures](#), we explored in one [episode](#) some action local authorities are taking to tackle issues with connectivity, including using 5G Mesh Networks and LoRaWAN (Long Range Wide Area Network) to support Internet-of-Things devices.

Ability influences digital exclusion with regard to skills and confidence, and the latter was an issue for carers and the people they cared for. Research from across the Centre for Care and its associates has underscored the importance of ongoing, accessible, face-to-face support for those who need support to develop digital skills and confidence.^{7,8} The third sector is often key in engaging with marginalised communities in support for digital inclusion but struggle financially to develop programmes that are sustainable.¹¹



BEYOND AFFORDABILITY, ACCESS AND ABILITY

There are other factors which affect digital exclusion which relate to **digital reluctance**, including issues of **trust**, the **design** of devices and systems, and concerns about a lack of meaningful **choice**.

Trust is particularly important when using digital devices and systems in care due to the sensitive and highly personal data they might collect and share. Examples of behaviour by organisations (e.g., Palantir, Earnd, UK Biobank, and Infosys) that have used health and care related data in controversial ways¹² have affected public trust. Inequalities experienced by people from ethnic minority backgrounds and LGBTQIA+ communities and people with experiences of migration can influence their trust in organisations and initiatives that use their data.^{13,14, 15}

From our research with carers, regarding trust, key concerns included:

- the risk of online **scams**, hacking, and viruses
- the **online safety** of younger people with learning disabilities (i.e. the risks of grooming and cyberbullying)
- **privacy**, with several carers finding certain digital devices and apps “a bit spishy.”¹⁷

Digital exclusion is sometimes framed in a way that assumes that the barriers lie in the wider context and/ or the individual characteristics of those who are excluded,^{16,17} overlooking the inaccessible design of devices and websites, which were highlighted as issues by carers.

The idea that everything should be ‘digital by default’ was challenged by the carers who felt they were being ‘pushed’ into using technology’. Some online services for specific tasks were felt to be useful and more accessible than face-to-face appointments, but for others, in-person was preferred. Choice was felt to be important, but this was being removed as ‘everything is online now’.

TERMS USED IN THIS EVIDENCE BRIEFING

Digital exclusion is having unequal access to the tools, skills and connectivity to go online or use digital technologies

Digital poverty is the inability of groups or people to access the online world fully, when, where, and how they need to, and this inability creates further disadvantage as things become increasingly digitalised.¹⁶

Digital reluctance is the unwillingness, or conscious choice by a person or groups of people to engage with, adopt, or fully utilise digital technology and online services because of issues related to trust, confidence or motivation.

Unpaid carers provide ongoing help and support to a family member, friend, or neighbour who needs assistance due to illness, disability, mental health problems, frailty, or addiction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The **causes of digital exclusion are wide-ranging**; solutions need to be considered within the broader context of marginalisation and discrimination. For digital services in social care to be inclusive for all, actions are required collaboratively between government, industry and civil society. We recommend:

- **Digital by choice, not default:** There should be recognition that tackling digital exclusion is not just about building infrastructure or the skills of individuals. Some people choose not to be online (for reasons of preference, trust, etc.) and therefore maintaining 'offline' options in social care is crucial as without them, some of the people who are most in need of support will be excluded and disadvantaged.¹⁸
- **Partnership and place-based initiatives based on local need:** Resourcing trusted organisations who play a key role in supporting digital inclusion through long-term funding is essential to enable them to support local communities to become more digitally included. Examples include Derbyshire Carers Association collaborating with Rural Action Derbyshire and Digital Support Derbyshire.¹⁹
- **Practical, ongoing support to address issues of skills and confidence:** Inclusive community spaces or 'hubs' are required, with trained supporters to facilitate access to online resources and develop digital skills. Training should be user-friendly, jargon-free, and cost-effective in short, simple sessions.
- **Actions to address issues of affordability and costs:** The cost of purchasing, updating, repairing and replacing devices are key challenges for many people who access care and support, and their carers. Loan and repair services for devices, social tariffs and the National Data Bank to support people to connect online and publicity about these services are important measures to tackle digital exclusion.



REFERENCES

- ¹ Rozansky, D et al. (2025). [“Fit for the Future” Our response to the UK Government’s 10 year plan for the NHS](#), Centre for Care Commentary.
- ² Whitfield, G., Hamblin, K. (2025) [‘Thanks to technology’: discourse, care and technology in England](#). *Ageing and Society*. Published online 2025:1-27.
- ³ House of Lords. (2023). Communications and Digital Committee 3rd Report of Session 2022–23
- HL Paper 219- Digital exclusion: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40662/documents/198365/default/>
- ⁴ Lloyds Banking Group (2021) [Consumer Digital Index report](#).
- ⁵ Ofcom. (2019). Disabled users access to and use of communication devices and services: Research summary: All disabled people: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/multi-sector/access-and-inclusion/2018/research-summary-all-disabilities.pdf?v=321473>.
- ⁶ Walker, T. (2022) [Digital Poverty Transformation: Accessing Digital Services in Rural North West Communities, Regional Policy Briefing](#). Work Foundation, Lancaster University.
- ⁷ Hamblin, K. and Black, R. (2023). [Digital exclusion and unpaid carers in South Yorkshire](#), Centre for Care Research Report, CIRCLE, Sheffield: University of Sheffield.
- ⁸ Roussaki, A.; Sbaffi, L.; Zamani, E.D.; Hamblin, K. and Black, R. (2024). [Digital Exclusion and Unpaid Carers](#). Centre for Care Research Report.
- ⁹ Ofcom (2022) [Affordability of Communications Services](#).
- ¹⁰ Prof. Efpraxia D. Zamani and Dr. Sara Vannini.
- ¹¹ Wagg, S. (2021) [An investigation of digital inclusion in UK rural communities](#). PhD Thesis. Loughborough University.
- ¹² Whitfield, G. (2023). [Who cares about data? Tensions between public trust and private interests in health and social care](#), Centre for Care Commentary
- ¹³ Flick, C., Zamani, E. D., Stahl, B. C. and Brem, A. (2020) [The future of ICT for health and ageing: Unveiling ethical and social issues through horizon scanning foresight](#). *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 155, 119995
- ¹⁴ Pheeraphuttharangkoon, S., Choudrie, J., Zamani, E.D. and Giaglis, G. (2014) [Investigation the adoption and use of smartphones in the UK: A silver surfers perspective](#), Proceedings of the European Conference on Information Systems (ECIS) 2014, Tel Aviv, Israel, June 9-11.
- ¹⁵ Vannini, S., Gomez, R. and Newell, B. C. (2019). [Mind the Five: Guidelines for Data Privacy and Security in Humanitarian Work with Irregular Migrants and Vulnerable Populations](#). *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology (JASIST)* 71: 927-38
- ¹⁶ Zamani, E.D. and Vannini, S. (2022) [Understanding Digital Poverty in South Yorkshire](#). Project Research Note.
- ¹⁷ Rutter, S., Zamani, E., McKenna-Aspell, J., & Wang, Y. (2024). Embedding equality, diversity and inclusion in usability testing: Recommendations and a research agenda. *International journal of human-computer studies*, 188, 103278.
- ¹⁸ Vannini, S., Wagg, S., Zamani, E.D., and Klyshbekova, M (2024). Strategic recommendations for effective service rollout, https://figshare.com/articles/report/Blueprint_for_digital_inclusion_Strategic_Recommendations_for_Effective_Service_Rollout/27891000?file=51031880
- ¹⁹ Wagg, S., Vannini, S., Zamani, E.D., Klyshbekova, M., Aylward, B and Jia, X. (2024) Digital inclusion network development: A case study in Derbyshire. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/digital-inclusion-network-development-case-study-derbyshire/>

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This evidence brief brings together research from across the Centre for Care and its associates that explores issues related to **digital exclusion and care, principally the impact on unpaid carers**.

ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR CARE

The Centre for Care is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, award ES/W002302/1), with contributions from the Department of Health and Social Care’s National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) and partner universities. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and are not necessarily those of the ESRC, UKRI, NHS or NIHR.

CONTACT

Please get in touch if you would like to know more, or to work with us on related issues, by contacting our support team:

centreforcare@sheffield.ac.uk

Sign up to our newsletter by visiting our website: www.centreforcare.ac.uk

Follow us on LinkedIn: Centre for Care

Bluesky: [@centreforcare.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/centreforcare.bsky.social)