



Digital exclusion and older unpaid carers

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INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVES

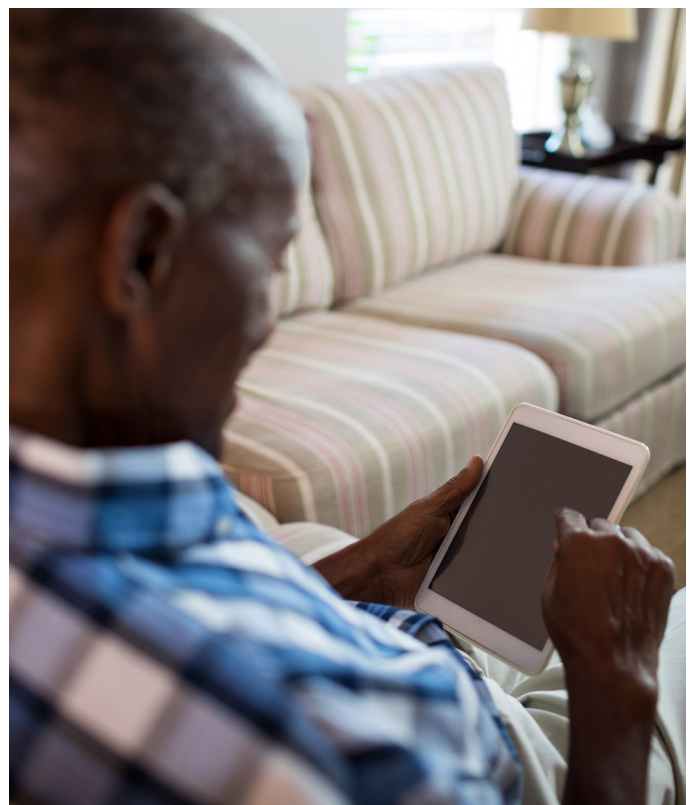
The ageing population is a significant global concern; as a result, unpaid carers play a crucial role in providing care to individuals with chronic illnesses, disabilities, or ongoing social care needs. The rapid advancement of technology and the growing demand for care have led to the transition of various services online, especially when it comes to caregiving. However, this digitalisation often poses challenges for many unpaid carers, contributing to issues of digital exclusion. Reasons for this exclusion include the cost of devices and internet access, lack of accessibility features, digital skills gaps, privacy concerns, and location-based factors.

Among the most affected groups by digital exclusion are older adults, who often face other, additional barriers such as lack of confidence, health-related challenges (e.g., dementia), and negative past experiences with digital technologies. The intersection of multiple disadvantages exacerbates digital exclusion, particularly for older unpaid carers, especially during the cost-of-living crisis. Such conditions present a variety of challenges e.g., difficulty accessing support services, financial disadvantages, lack of respite from caregiving, and difficulties in maintaining employment.

The information in this summary is based on a report emerging from a synthesis of various sources, including parliamentary submissions, government evaluations, assessments of digitalisation initiatives and caregiving programs, and reports from organisations like Carers UK and the Good Things Foundation. These materials cover a wide range of topics, including digitalisation, policy evaluations related to caregiving, assessments of practices for digital inclusion, parliamentary discussions on data protection and assistive technologies, and more.

As a result, the present report and, therefore, summary, aim to tackle the following questions:

1. What are the common, dominant themes identified in the existing literature regarding the digitalisation of care for older, unpaid carers?
2. Which policies have been empirically demonstrated to be effective in ameliorating potential barriers to digital inclusion?



COMMON THEMES

The findings highlight the following important themes:

ADDRESSING DIGITAL POVERTY

Financial challenges such as the cost of devices, connectivity and the cost-of-living crisis have a substantial impact on digital inclusion. Such barriers could be addressed through the provision of devices such as tablets and laptop. Another solution would be achieving affordable connectivity, via social tariffs or “zero-rating” policies, offering discounts or free internet connection.

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Assistive technologies such as devices monitoring blood sugar can be proven beneficial. Yet, it is crucial that they are designed on the premise of data safety, security, and data protection. This would require legislative and policy efforts to ensure and reinforce transparency in data usage.

DIGITAL HUBS AND VOLUNTEERS

A beneficial initiative is the creation and maintenance of inclusive community spaces (hubs) with trained volunteers to facilitate access to online resources and develop digital skills.

FUNDING AND COMMISSIONING

The report highlights the need for funding to support voluntary and community sector organisations working on digitalisation for carers and those they care for.

AWARENESS REGARDING CARE

The findings highlight the importance of addressing societal stigma, lack of awareness, and deficient care-related policies affecting caregivers, promoting social tariffs and support mechanisms.

MAINTAINING OFFLINE OPTIONS

It is crucial for policymakers to acknowledge the importance of traditional in-person services for individuals facing barriers to online access, especially those with complex needs.

CO-PRODUCTION AND CO-DESIGN

Policymakers, researchers and funders should involve carers in policy and initiative development through participatory research to meet their needs.



ACCESSIBLE TRAINING

To assist digital inclusion, the provision of user-friendly, jargon-free, and cost-effective digital skills training in short, simple sessions is deemed beneficial.

INCLUSIVE INITIATIVES FOR VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

The potential design of initiatives for vulnerable individuals should include customised assistance for digitally excluded individuals within specific vulnerable or marginalised communities.

TAILORED SUPPORT

To facilitate digital inclusion, any provision of training should offer one-to-one, ongoing digital learning support tailored to the trainee’s needs.

INTEROPERABILITY

Interoperability is crucial when it comes to the transition of services online, such as accessing medical records online or on an app, having a Zoom call with a healthcare or social care professional, completing a Carer’s Assessment online rather than face to face, using the internet to find resources about caring or a health condition. Interoperability involves tackling issues related to connecting services and exchanging data, with a particular focus on healthcare. Its goal is to create streamlined pathways for referrals and to create a cohesive system for health records

WORKING WITH PARTNERS AND COMMUNITY ASSETS

When it comes to digital inclusion, it is not always necessary to find, create or design new resources. Leveraging existing resources, partnerships, and collaborations across sectors to support carers’ digital well-being.



CONCLUSION

While there has been significant progress regarding the digital inclusion of older, unpaid carers via programs, initiatives, and policies, there is also a pressing demand for substantial changes, both in terms of macro-policy as well as micro-community levels. Digital poverty and exclusion are the main challenges that should be addressed. Moreover, further awareness and funding within the care sector are essential. Future initiatives should prioritise adequate funding, co-designing initiatives and policies with older unpaid carers, and emphasise human rights as their guiding principle.