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NEWS ANALYSIS

Charities step in to tackle digital divide, amid concerns over health inequalities

The covid pandemic saw many everyday services move online, but the NHS's push for "digital transformation" may mean digitally excluded and vulnerable people are left behind. **Elisabeth Mahase** examines what work is being done to tackle this issue

Elisabeth Mahase

Across the UK many services have become "digital first" since the covid-19 pandemic began, and it has become more difficult to speak to someone over the phone or in person if a issue arises. This can frustrate many people, but for those who are digitally excluded it can make accessing even basic services impossible. When it comes to healthcare it can risk worsening existing inequalities, an issue NHS England is keenly aware of.¹

Bola Akinwale, the NHS's deputy director for the National Healthcare Inequalities Improvement Programme, raised this concern at the Royal Society of Medicine's Tackling Inequalities conference in London on 16 January.

"Digital innovations can be a lifeline for many groups. They can enable remote care. They can empower people, but only if we do it in the right ways," Akinwale said.

In September NHS England published its "framework for NHS action on digital inclusion," which warned that digital exclusion can "compound health inequalities by exacerbating challenges with access to healthcare."² It said that around 7% of households do not have home internet access and around one million people had to cancel their broadband package in the last 12 months because of rising costs. Additionally, 30% of people who are offline reported that the NHS was "one of the most difficult organisations to interact with," it said.

Among the groups most at risk of being digitally excluded NHS England listed older people (especially those aged over 75), people living in rural and coastal areas (owing to poor internet access), people on low incomes, disabled people, and people who are less fluent in English. Its framework outlined actions that NHS leaders across the country should be taking to reduce the risk of digital exclusion, including by identifying which groups of people may need extra support and partnering with local government and charities to provide this.

"Covid heightened the digital divide"

One example of where local action is already being taken is in Derbyshire, where NHS Charities Together, a federation of over 250 charitable organisations that support the NHS, awarded the charity Rural Action Derbyshire (RAD) funding in April 2022 to tackle the problem.³

Around 62 000 people in Derbyshire have never used the internet, and many more lack essential digital skills, according to the digital inclusion charity Citizens Online.⁴ This issue has become more prominent since the pandemic, which "heightened the digital divide" as more services became "digital by default," it said.

With this in mind, RAD's Digital Support Derbyshire project has been working with local partners to provide donated devices, digital exclusion awareness training, access to devices at food banks, and technology lessons (box 1). One project partner, the wellbeing charity The Bureau,⁵ which is based in Glossop, has been focusing on helping people who are excluded from digital GP services. The organisation was commissioned by Tameside and Glossop Clinical Commissioning Group in 2021 to work on this issue and has since worked with 22 general practices and six community groups or venues, providing training to staff and taking user referrals.

Box 1: "Unable to contact emergency services"

The impact of the Digital Support Derbyshire project can be seen in the case of "G," an anonymised user. G was 74 years old and became profoundly deaf a few years ago. He was unable to lip read or communicate by sign language, lived alone, had no family, and had medical problems that saw him regularly in A&E, as he could not contact NHS 111.

G was referred to one of the project partners, Tea, Talk and Tech, because he was frightened at not being able to contact anyone, including emergency services. Although he had received a donated smartphone, he didn't know how to use it.

The Tea, Talk and Tech team helped him install a transcription app that then enabled him to communicate with them. They also helped him purchase a sim card for his phone and install an app that enables deaf, speech impaired, and hearing people talk to each other over the phone. Five weeks later G was able to make a call from start to finish on his own.

The group runs digital workshops and one-to-one sessions and also helps people over the phone or by email where appropriate. It teaches people how to use the NHS app, book GP appointments, and order repeat prescriptions online. By the end of 2023 it had received just over 2300 referrals, most of these being people aged over 55.

Ageing society

Speaking at the Royal Society of Medicine conference, GP Adrian Hayter, NHS England's national clinical director for older people and integrated person centred care, emphasised the growing importance of ensuring that older people are not digitally excluded.

"Today, there are about 15 000 people living to 100. In 2064 it's going to be half a million," Hayter said. "We are living in a population where older people are going to be a big feature of our society."

But he warned that although people are living longer, the number of healthy life years is actually falling. "We have to think about this in terms of framing digital inclusion going forward, because our population, our society, is changing," he said.

Hayter highlighted one local initiative focusing on older people, being led by Age UK Isle of Wight, an independent charity that is separate to but affiliated with Age UK. Although the charity has offered some digital support services since 2016, it found that the need grew significantly during the pandemic.⁶ In early 2021 it surveyed over 700 people and found that 17% were not very confident with using technology.⁷ Of these, 28% said they would like to be able to book and attend virtual GP appointments, and a quarter (24%) said they would like to be able to order their prescriptions online.

In light of these findings, and with funding from the National Lottery Community Fund and Age UK, the group has now been able to expand its team and support hundreds of people through home visits, group workshops, and drop-in sessions across the island. Last year it helped 520 people with their digital skills and delivered more than 800 sessions, during which they tackled the problems people had with accessing healthcare and booking transport and accommodation for when they had to travel to places such as Southampton and London for NHS appointments. "I feel less worried and vulnerable," one user told the charity. "If I now run into trouble I know where to start looking for help."

1 NHS England. Digital transformation. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/digitaltechnology>

2 NHS England. Inclusive digital healthcare: a framework for NHS action on digital inclusion. Sep 2023. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/inclusive-digital-healthcare-a-framework-for-nhs-action-on-digital-inclusion>

3 Digital Support Derbyshire. <https://www.ruralactionderbyshire.org.uk/digital-support-derbyshire>

4 Digital inclusion across Derbyshire: call for collaboration. <https://www.citizenonline.org.uk/digital-inclusion-across-derbyshire-call-for-collaboration>

5 The Digital Healthcare Support Service. The Bureau. <https://the-bureau.org.uk/services/the-digital-healthcare-support-service>

6 Digital Inclusion. Age UK Isle of Wight. <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/isleofwight/our-services/digital-inclusion>

7 Age Friendly Island Digital Survey. 2021. <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/wp-assets/globalassets/isle-of-wight/original-blocks/our-services/afi/afi-digital-survey-2021-final-report.pdf>