



Digital exclusion:

The new face of social exclusion for vulnerable clients

A report by Gloucestershire/CUBA social policy cluster group of Citizens Advice Bureaux

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About the Gloucestershire/ CUBA social policy cluster group

The Gloucestershire /CUBA social policy cluster group is an informal group of Citizens Advice Bureaux in Gloucestershire, Bristol and North Somerset, who work together to research evidence and campaign on social policy issues affecting our clients.

Introduction

The use of computers and the growth of the internet are exciting technological advances that are having a widespread and beneficial impact on most of us, both at work and at home. However, there are many vulnerable people, who are not able to cope with these technologies, and are in danger of becoming digitally excluded.

The problem

Service providers in all sectors of the UK economy are moving towards providing alternative access to their services through digital routes, in particular the internet. The use of plastic (credit/debit cards, membership cards, etc.) instead of cash is already well established. Commercial organisations, such as the finance sector and utilities, are all well down these paths, and government agencies have started to introduce internet access to information and services, with a target to have such access available in all government departments by 2012.

Whilst this is an excellent and welcome development for the majority of the population, there is a danger that some vulnerable citizens could become excluded through lack of access to the internet, or lack of basic skills like computer literacy. This could be exacerbated by some service providers moving over completely to digital processes, and not maintaining alternative access routes for those unable to access or cope with digital processes. This has already happened in one particular example (see Appendix 2), the Gloucestershire Homeseeker Scheme, where the only way that citizens in the county could register on the new choice based letting social housing register was through their website.

Many central government agencies are introducing internet based claim processes for benefits – for example one can now claim Job Seeker's Allowance and Employment Support Allowance on line. Also Gloucester City Council has introduced online claiming for Housing Benefit. At present these agencies currently maintain a paper/telephone claim system for those without internet access, but for how long will they do this when faced with cut backs which may well reduce staffing levels?

Similarly, it is now possible for motorists to renew their Road Fund Tax disc annually on the DVLA website, a much quicker and cheaper process for DVLA. Whilst alternative access routes (postal or over the counter in Post Offices) remain available, the only face-to-face route is being restricted as more and more sub Post Offices are being closed, or having the capability to renew Road Fund Tax discs withdrawn.

Following the Digital Britain Report (2009) the Government set up of the Digital Inclusion Task Force to develop ways and means of decreasing the number of those who do not have internet access or the computer literacy skills required to use the internet. The coalition government has committed to building on this work, and has re-appointed Martha Lane-Fox as UK Digital Champion to further the Race Online 2012 campaign¹. The Home Access Programme, where grants for purchasing home computers and broadband internet connection to low-income families with children in state schools is a welcome initiative (see Appendix 3), but it is not yet reaching all the eligible families, and there are many CAB clients who are still without access.

Whilst the Office for National Statistics survey in 2009² found internet access to be increasing among the UK population with over 70 per cent at that time having access at home, this is not so true of CAB clients where we see a higher proportion of people on low income or benefit. Five Citizens Advice Bureaux in the Gloucestershire and Bristol region carried out client surveys during March/April of 2010 and found that over 40 per cent of clients do not have internet access at home, and indeed some 26 per cent have

no access at all, either through not being computer-literate, or unable to readily reach a public access point, such as internet cafés or libraries (see Appendix 1). These survey results show that it is mostly our more vulnerable clients (the elderly, unemployed, and sick/disabled) who are now facing digital exclusion.

It is our belief that, while much can be done to bring more of the population to a level where they can, and do, use the internet, there will always be a residual number who cannot participate, and for whom there will need to be maintained alternative well-understood access routes to essential information and services. After all, there are still a significant residual number of people in UK who cannot read and write sufficiently well to complete forms or understand written instructions, and need support to fulfil such mundane functions. However, it will be increasingly sensible to use internet access and digital processes as the main way to carry out many day-to-day transactions, and so there is a need to develop resources to support vulnerable people in these transactions. Many voluntary sector organisations have the skills and capability to do this, but would need additional funding to build up their resources to meet this growing need (see Appendix 4).

In addition, the British Standards Institution (BSI) is currently developing a new standard (BSI 18477 - Inclusive Service Provision) to address this issue. This is at the public consultation stage and will be introduced later this year³. If all information and service providers adopt this standard as policy it will materially help to minimise the risk of digital exclusion that is making vulnerable people even more disadvantaged.

¹ 'Race Online 2012' website. <http://raceonline2012.org> See also the 'Race Online' manifesto at this website

² ONS website – Internet access statistical bulletin – 2009: www.statistics.gov.uk

³ British Standard (BS 18477 – Inclusive Service Provision, Requirements for identifying and responding to consumer vulnerability) www.bsigroup.com

Recommendations

- ◆ Local authorities should have a duty to provide support to vulnerable people to help them access the internet when they need it. They could harness the capabilities of organisations in the voluntary sector in their areas, like Citizens Advice Bureaux, Age UK, etc., to provide this support. This would require some funding to allow such organisations to build resources to do the job, and some publicity and promotion to ensure that local people who need this support know where to get it.
- ◆ It should be made a requirement that all government departments delivering information, services and benefits to the public should comply fully with the new British Standard 18477 – Inclusive Service Provision⁴. The Government and relevant regulators should also use their very powerful influence to encourage financial service providers and the utility supply companies to adopt this standard as policy.
- ◆ The Home Access Programme should be extended to ensure sufficient funding for all eligible families, and that there should be a systematic search to identify all such families, through Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and Department for Work and Pensions. We believe that LEAs should manage this programme with ring-fenced funding.

4 ibid

Appendix 1

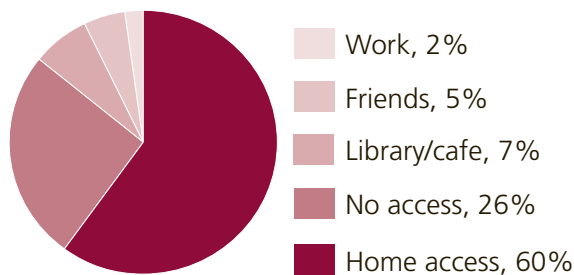
Internet access

Survey of Citizens Advice bureaux clients

This analysis is based on survey questionnaires completed by clients calling at Forest of Dean, Gloucester City, Cheltenham, Bristol, and South Gloucestershire Citizens Advice Bureaux during March/April 2010. A total of 998 clients completed the survey.

- ◆ 60 per cent have access to the internet at home.
- ◆ 26 per cent do not have access to the internet at all.
- ◆ The remainder access the internet through friends, at work, or use libraries or internet cafés.

Do you have internet access?



Two of the surveys also asked clients (135) without internet access at home for reasons why this is the case:

- ◆ 50 per cent cannot afford access.
- ◆ 13.5 per cent consider they do not need it.
- ◆ 18.9 per cent cannot use a computer.
- ◆ Some did not give any reason, probably because they have access elsewhere.

In the Forest of Dean⁵ we also asked those who do have internet access at home the sort of connection and how good it was:

- ◆ 79.6 per cent use broadband.
- ◆ 14 per cent have mobile broadband.
- ◆ 5.4 per cent use slower dial up connection.
- ◆ 40.9 per cent of users reported problems with connection – mostly speed.

Profiles – Types of people who do not have internet access at home

Some of the bureaux correlated profile data of clients (collected separately as part of the usual advice-giving process) to the responses on questionnaires returned. Not all responses could be included as it was not always possible to link profile data to them; however 608 client responses were correlated with client profile data.

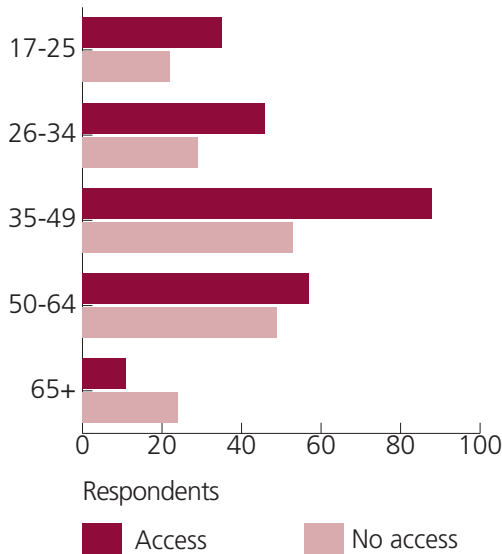
The purpose of this exercise was to see if any particular type of client is differently affected. We identified gender, age-band, disability, ethnic origin, occupation, housing, and household.

In many cases there was no discernable correlation between particular profile elements and whether these clients had internet access at home or not. However in the case of age and occupation there were clear differences.

Below are charts showing internet access at home (or not) against these profile elements.

⁵ The Forest of Dean is a rural area with much of the population living some distance away from their Telephone Exchange and with nearly all the cables being copper wire. This results in slower broadband speeds.

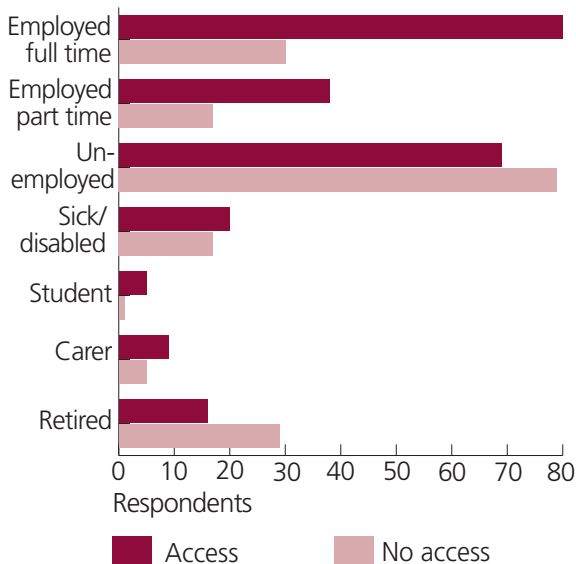
Internet access by age



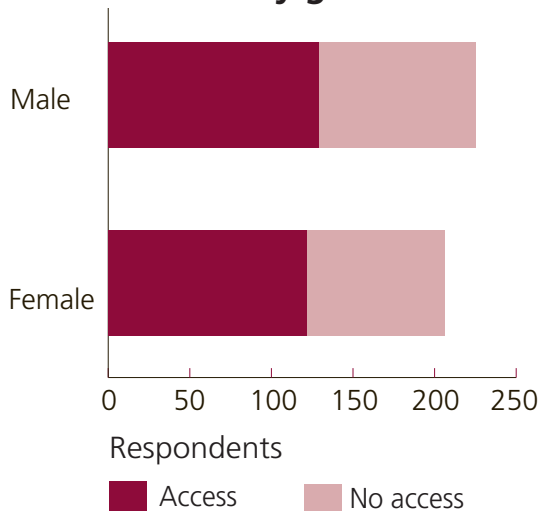
From these survey figures we can conclude:

- ◆ Female clients are slightly more likely to have internet access at home.
- ◆ Older people have less internet access at home than younger.
- ◆ People on benefit (unemployed and permanently sick) are less likely to have internet access at home as against those in employment, although they probably spend more time at home.
- ◆ Retired people are less likely to have internet access at home, which may have as much to do with their age as their occupational status.

Internet access by occupation



Internet access by gender



Appendix 2

Gloucestershire Homeseeker scheme

Forest of Dean CAB first became directly aware of a problem late summer 2009 when a number of vulnerable clients came in seeking assistance to register on the local authority housing list for social housing. These included an elderly couple on Pension Credit, with severe disabilities, and a single woman with learning difficulties, both living in private rented accommodation and already registered on the LA housing list.

Case study

Jane (not her real name) is a 44 year old single woman with learning difficulties. She lives in the community, on low income and benefits, in a private rented flat, and has a support worker who visits her periodically to help her with any problems. Jane does not have access to the internet at home and is not computer literate so cannot access the internet at a library.

In September 2009 Jane was faced with having to re-register for the social housing list on the new Gloucestershire wide 'Choice Based Letting' system (Homeseeker) that is only accessible on the internet. The local council did not have an alternative paper application form, were not able to transfer her existing registration to the new system, and said they did not have the resources to help her use the internet system. Jane was very anxious that her registration on the Housing List would lapse as she was unable to register, and she continues to worry about her ability to bid for properties when they become available.

We learnt that the Forest of Dean district council (FoDDC) was now participating in a countywide Housing List scheme, with all the other district councils, named Gloucestershire Homeseeker. This is a countywide housing application register and letting process providing Choice Based Letting (CBL). We had received a leaflet on it, giving information on how to register, but no further briefing on it. We rapidly found out that all the people already on the FoDDC housing list (circa 2000) had been sent a letter and the leaflet by FoDDC telling them they needed to re-register on the Gloucestershire Homeseeker CBL housing list.

People can only register on the Gloucestershire Homeseeker scheme on its website. When clients went to the council offices to say that they did not have internet access at home, or the skills needed to use computers or the internet, they were advised to use the free internet access provided in libraries, or signposted to the CAB.

We tackled the immediate problems and assisted about two dozen clients to register. It is a long-winded process requiring a great amount of personal information to be entered, and takes at least an hour to complete if everything goes smoothly. However, the process of entry is poorly designed, so that you can only move from one page to the next when you have fully completed the page. There is a little introductory instruction on what information you will need to provide, but you can find out after 3 pages (of 15) that there may be a bit of precise information you don't have to hand (e.g. exact dates of previous addresses and previous social housing) and you need to look them up. This may be alright at home but can be quite a problem if you are out at the library, at a friend's, or at the CAB.

We spoke to FoDDC, and also to our MP, and to colleagues in other local voluntary

sector organisations, and then we all had a meeting with FoDDC housing department on the 15 October about the issue. Some resolution of the problem was achieved and since then we have sent some clients wishing to register back to FoDDC to ask for the paper application form, which we believe FoDDC then enter on the Gloucestershire Homeseeker web site. We continue to assist the more vulnerable (often bewildered) clients by entering their registration on this web site at the bureau.

This whole issue spurred us to raise it at the Gloucestershire/CUBA cluster group meeting in October; most bureaux there decided to carry out surveys on internet access among their clients, and to research any other areas where our clients are becoming digitally excluded. We carried out surveys in five bureaux across the region, about 'internet access at home' on all clients who visited the bureaux during March/April 2010, and have analysed the results (Appendix 1).

Appendix 3

Home Access Programme

The Home Access Programme is a government initiative that helps low-income families who currently lack access to a computer and/or internet to get online at home, so that children can undertake homework using the internet. It provides a grant to eligible families to purchase a computer, 1 year's free internet access, and 1 year's free support.

To be eligible the family must have dependent children in year 3 to year 9 inclusive attending a state school. The family must also be on low income – defined as being on means tested benefit (e.g. income support, income based JSA or ESA, pension credit, free school meals) or on income below £16190 plus child tax credits.

It has been a very successful programme with more than 237,000 grants awarded to eligible families by July 2010 leaving only 20,000 left to distribute. However, this number is not nearly enough to meet the need. Most clients completing the surveys showing they did not have Internet Access at home had not heard of the programme. How were eligible families made aware of this opportunity?

It was managed by BECTA (a 'quango' now scheduled for closure) and there appears to have been no formal plan or mechanism to ensure that all eligible families are made aware of this help available to get them 'Digitally Included'. The programme really needs to be extended and directly marketed to the people it is meant to help. The funding could be ring-fenced and put under the control of Local Education Authorities, and they be made responsible for ensuring that every eligible family is directly made aware of this opportunity.

Appendix 4

Citizens Advice Bureaux initiatives

Bristol Advice Point (BAP)

In June, this year Bristol Citizens Advice Bureau opened new premises, Bristol Advice Point, to cope with the growing demand on its services. A triage or Gateway system operates so that clients are quickly directed to the most appropriate source of help for their particular enquiry – an appointment with one of the volunteer advisers, access to information either printed or on-line or referral to another agency.

Six public-access computers provide links to the CAB website Adviceguide and also to a range of other sites including ACAS, Bristol City council, Consumer Direct, Directgov, HMRC, Immigration Advisory Service, Payplan, and Refugee Action. The computers are available during BAP's opening hours (9.30am-4.30pm each weekday) with support from a member of staff and/or volunteers.

Clients waiting to be assessed can use the computers to look up information themselves and may need no further help at this stage. In the first 10 weeks of this service, 219 people have been recorded as using only the on-line facilities and requiring no further help.

The development of Bristol Advice Point was made possible by funding from a number of sources including Bristol City Council, Citizens Advice, John James Foundation, and Capacity Builders. Support for people using the computers is provided as part of the reception role. Further funding may be sought to develop this aspect of services provided.

A number of other Citizens Advice Bureaux across the UK have also secured funding to set up similar facilities where clients can be trained in use of the internet; or where they can simply access the internet, with skilled support available, to carry out the transactions they need to undertake.

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