

How easy is it for older people to access council services in Greater Manchester?

This report outlines the findings of an informal audit of the 10 council websites by the GM Older People's Equality Panel and GM Older People's Network, and sets out recommendations for how councils can better enable older people to complete specific key tasks.

**OLDER
PEOPLE'S
EQUALITY
PANEL**

**DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY
FOR GREATER MANCHESTER**



greater
manchester
older
people's
network

Contents

Executive Summary	4
Overview.....	4
Key Findings.....	5
Recommendations.....	6
Introduction	8
Methodology.....	10
Workshop 1	10
Workshop 2	11
Workshop 3	11
Findings	12
Cookies	12
Accessibility	12
Search tools and menu systems	12
Relevance and presentation of the information.	13
Non digital options	14
Conclusions.....	16
Appendices	19
Appendix I	20



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network

Since being established in 2015 the GM Older People's Network has worked hard to ensure as many older people as possible from across Greater Manchester have the opportunity to get their voices heard. The network has a membership of 500, a mixture of individuals and organisations and works in partnership with many organisations across Greater Manchester maintaining a strong link with the Greater Manchester Ageing Hub (Greater Manchester Combined Authority).

OLDER PEOPLE'S EQUALITY PANEL

**DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY
FOR GREATER MANCHESTER**

The Older People's Equality Panel is one of seven equality panels established and funded by the GMCA.

Greater Manchester Equality Panels have been established to advise, support and challenge Greater Manchester's political leaders and policy-makers to tackle the discrimination and disadvantage that cause injustice and inequality in society, and champion Greater Manchester as an inclusive city-region. They do this by working together with the GMCA, its partners and local communities.

All members of the Network and the Panel are volunteers.

The Network and the Panel are supported by Macc.

October 2023

Executive Summary

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic pushed many people towards digital solutions leading to a more connected life. However, GM Older People's Equality Panel and GM Older People's Network are regularly made aware this has not been the case for many older people, particularly those aged 75+.

In 2022, the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration Greater Manchester published research^{1,2}, focused on older people's experiences of accessing online public services in the city region. This work was undertaken in partnership with the GM Ageing Hub and as a response to the mayoral manifesto priority around digital inclusion and older people. The researchers recognised that there was much being done to support residents in later life around digital, but that more was required to assess the extent to which public services had become digital by default.

To help take forward some of the findings of the research, the GM Ageing Hub asked the Panel to conduct an informal audit of GM council websites from an age friendly perspective and to produce some recommendations around improved access to key services.

Overview

A team of 7 were recruited from the network and panel membership. The group designed the audit process at an initial workshop. Five tasks were agreed by the group with the intention of testing reporting to the council, requesting an item or service and making an application.

Testing was carried out over several weeks with each website visited by different testers completing allocated tasks to ensure that all sites had different testers for each of the tasks.

¹ ARC-GM: What factors have impacted on older people's (75+) access/experience of public services during Covid-19?Phase I–Jan 22 https://arc-gm.nihr.ac.uk/media/page_images/ARC/Healthy%20Ageing/DI%20Briefing%20Note%2006%20Jan%202022.pdf

² ARC-GM: What factors have impacted on older people's (75+) access/experience of public services during Covid-19?Phase II–Jun 22 https://arc-gm.nihr.ac.uk/media/Resources/ARC/Healthy%20Ageing/Digital%20Inclusion/Digital%20Inclusion%20Report_Phase%20II_27-06-22.pdf

The group were made up of people who were a range of ages and had a varied skillset – the majority were familiar with supporting less experienced users.

One of the main aims was to identify possible barriers to inexperienced users who may be discouraged more easily.

Key Findings

Cookies: The increased risk of cybercrime has created a greater sense of being vulnerable and at risk to unknowns. The testers felt that sites which offered a customised choice of cookies may confuse inexperienced users.

General agreement that an option to accept necessary cookies only was the preferred option.

Accessibility was not tested but most testers highlighted that the toolbar was difficult to manage.

Search tools on the websites varied - testers felt that inexperienced users may type a full sentence rather than use keywords. Some websites' search tools did not produce relevant results for a sentence. Most testers felt that the search tool was very useful, especially if the menu was difficult.

Navigating through the menu or individual pages was sometimes a challenge. Some testers failed to find the first menu button if it was not included on the first page of options – requiring a click on “more services.”

This might be the type of barrier to discourage infrequent users. Rather than a button or arrow labelled more services a prominent label with “Can't see what you are looking for? Click here” would be less likely to be missed. Also a prompt to scroll down for more information would be useful.

Testers felt that the use of language/ terminology was a difficulty in menus. To find the right menu it was sometimes necessary to be familiar with the language used, for example, Adult Social Care might not be a familiar phrase for someone who was looking for information on support needs. Several testers associated Blue Badge with Disability support options.

How information was presented was generally good. Testers found that an excess of information on one page was a barrier as it could be confusing and put people off searching for what they needed. The key concern raised was the size of text as a default. The screen size could be changed to make it more readable but this created more problems with scrolling.

The group agreed that there was a divide in tone – some websites presented with a “friendly voice” while others were very “business like”. The friendly voice was much preferred and testers felt that the business-like approach might intimidate inexperienced users.

The use of videos was rare but very welcome when available – particularly if giving advice on a potentially stressful situations such as seeking support in a care setting.

Although this was an informal audit of websites the group also wanted to record if and how non-digital options were made available. By far the preferred arrangement was if a relevant phone number was prominent on the page dealing with the issue. This was the case in minority of websites. In the main a phone number could be found at the bottom of the page if “contact us” was clicked. The result varied – sometimes taking the tester to a directory of services, sometimes to a general phone number. There were occasions when there was no phone number.

Recommendations

The group are a mix of older people; some have used digital devices and the Internet for many years, some are very new to being online. They all agree that digital participation is an advantage.

The Panel is keen to build relationships with Councils to ensure that residents can engage and would recommend the following:

- There is a need to understand that the digital divide is not binary - digitally included v digitally excluded. It is certainly the case that there are older people who do not wish to have to use digital services and, either, depend on others when it is required or do not engage. It is also the case that many older people are moving to online platforms to stay connected because they feel they need to. They may lack confidence or depend on others to resolve any difficulties but they are attempting to use digital services. The

Panel feels that it is very important that this group is encouraged and supported.

- Identifying potential barriers is key as, often what may be considered, a trivial or minor problem can present a major barrier. The majority of the testers are familiar with using websites and do not consider themselves lacking in confidence; however, they found some of the tasks to be more difficult than they expected. Working with user groups would be a useful way to build an understanding of what works and what doesn't.
- The panel found presentation an issue in some websites but found what worked was:
 - a friendly voice
 - clear good sized text (minimum 14)
 - well laid out with minimal cluttering
 - change through a menu made more consistent
 - accessibility tools easier to use
 - an appropriate phone number prominently placed
- The Panel is keen to have a discussion on how realistic any proposed changes might be:
 - Can menus be improved - be arranged in a themed way - reflecting frequency of use or set themes/ alphabetical?
 - Is it possible for different layouts to be available so that a streamlined, larger text or dementia friendly version can be selected at the start?
 - How would an AI based interface be designed to respond to different users?
- Appropriate non-digital options must be available and recognised by council staff as a key means of engagement. Many inexperienced users will feel reassured if a phone number is available knowing that if their attempts to use the website falter they can fall back on that option.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic pushed many people towards digital solutions leading to a more connected life. However, GM Older People's Equality Panel and GM Older People's Network are regularly made aware this has not been the case for many older people, particularly those aged 75+.

This concern is addressed in Andy Burnham's 2021 manifesto³ which highlighted the particular risk for older people of being left out of the conversation and losing access to services and opportunities if not supported online.

Following his re-election in May 2021, Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, announced ambitions for Greater Manchester to become one of the first city-regions in the world to equip all under-25s, over-75s and disabled people with the skills, connectivity and technology to get online.

As part of his reinforced commitment to get residents online, Andy Burnham established a Digital Inclusion Action Network (DIAN). The Digital Inclusion Action Network leads targeted action to combat digital exclusion with a specific focus on supporting under-25s, over-75s and disabled people in Greater Manchester.

The work of the DIAN is welcome and there are many initiatives across the boroughs to provide support for older people who wish to get online; however, a repeated concern expressed to the Network and the Panel is that we have now moved to a 'Digital by Default' model for public services.

This is borne out by several reports published since 2020. The Centre for Ageing Better published a briefing in August 2020: How has COVID-19 changed the landscape of digital inclusion?⁴ It recognised that there had been an increase in older people being online but that this was a combination of more people getting online and those already online

³ Andy For Mayor May 2021: <https://andyformayor.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Andy-Burnham-Manifesto-v2.1-002.pdf>

⁴ Centre for Ageing Better: How has COVID-19 changed the landscape of digital inclusion? – Aug 20: https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-08/Digital-inclusion-landscape-changes-COV19_0.pdf

doing more online. As many public services moved online the digitally excluded were cut further adrift.

The GM Residents Survey⁵ measures digital exclusion by looking at a range of factors: consistent and reliable access to an internet connection at home and to devices that allow access to the internet; affording access to the internet; skills needed to access and use digital services online; support needed to access and use digital services online.

Digital exclusion is measured in how many of these categories apply. The most recent survey (July 23) shows that 67% of residents who are 75+ experience at least one of these aspects of digital exclusion with 17% experiencing all aspects.

The survey also attempts to measure confidence in using digital services with 38% of residents who are 65+ (and living alone) describing themselves as lacking confidence using digital services.

In 2022, the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration Greater Manchester published research^{6,7}, focused on older people's experiences of accessing online public services in the city region. This work was undertaken in partnership with the GM Ageing Hub and as a response to the mayoral manifesto priority around digital inclusion and older people. The researchers recognised that there was much being done to support residents in later life around digital, but that more was required to assess the extent to which public services had become digital by default.

To help take forward some of the findings of the research, the GM Ageing Hub asked the Panel to conduct an informal audit of GM council websites from an age friendly perspective and to produce some recommendations around improved access to key services.

⁵ GM Resident Survey Wave 8 –Sep 22: <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/8162/website-gmca-resident-survey-w8-full-report-.pdf>

⁶ ARC-GM: What factors have impacted on older people's (75+) access/experience of public services during Covid-19?Phase I–Jan 22 <https://arc-gm.nihr.ac.uk/media/page/images/ARC/Healthy%20Ageing/DI%20Briefing%20Note%2006%20Jan%202022.pdf>

⁷ ARC-GM: What factors have impacted on older people's (75+) access/experience of public services during Covid-19?Phase II–Jun 22 https://arc-gm.nihr.ac.uk/media/Resources/ARC/Healthy%20Ageing/Digital%20Inclusion/Digital%20Inclusion%20Report_Phase%20II_27-06-22.pdf

Methodology

The Panel's Digital Participation Subgroup recruited a small team of 7 from the network and panel membership.

Workshop 1

An initial workshop was an opportunity for the team to design the audit and how it would be conducted. It was also a chance to discuss all concerns and positive experiences.

Five tasks were selected to reflect a range of council services:

- Reporting an issue.
- Applying for a service
- Requesting action.

The audit's limitations were recognised given that the processes would not be continued to an outcome.

The team of seven were resident in 4 of the boroughs but agreed to audit each of the websites. After a discussion on the group's experience of using council website it was agreed to focus on the following parameters:

1. Dealing with cookies
2. Use of websites' search tools
3. Use of menu systems
4. Information relevance
5. Information presentation
6. Non-digital options to complete tasks

The group talked about their experiences using council websites to access services or seek information and advice. It was agreed that each website would be tested using five tasks based on relevance and prior experience on the tester's council website:

- A. Apply for an item (blue badge)
- B. Report issue (dangerous pavement)
- C. Request an item (food waste bag)

- D. Seek information (how to apply for social care – care needs assessment/ carer support)
- E. Report change in circumstances for Council Tax

The group discussed their own experiences and those of their close communities. This discussion covered wider issues and raised concerns about how digital participation can be limited without leading to exclusion. There was agreement that this project would look at barriers for older people who want to engage with digital options.

The group were mixed in terms of digital skills and experience, ranging from beginner level to very competent. The ages of participants were aged 55 – 82.

Workshop 2

The process of was demonstrated to the testers and each website was looked at briefly.

The process involved going through the steps of completing each task focusing on the agreed six parameters. It was agreed that each test would be recorded on a form – capturing information about specific issues.

All the information was then collated for the report.

Testers were allocated a specific task for each website and asked to record their experience on the recording form.

Workshop 3

After completing the tasks the group met to discuss the results, positive and negative impressions and possible next steps.

Findings

Cookies

There was recognition that accepting cookies is a necessary part of using a website but there was some hesitancy around their safety. The increased risk of cybercrime has created a greater sense of being vulnerable and at risk to unknowns. Some participants accepted all to move on quickly, some rejected all and some made a selection to limit which cookies were accepted.

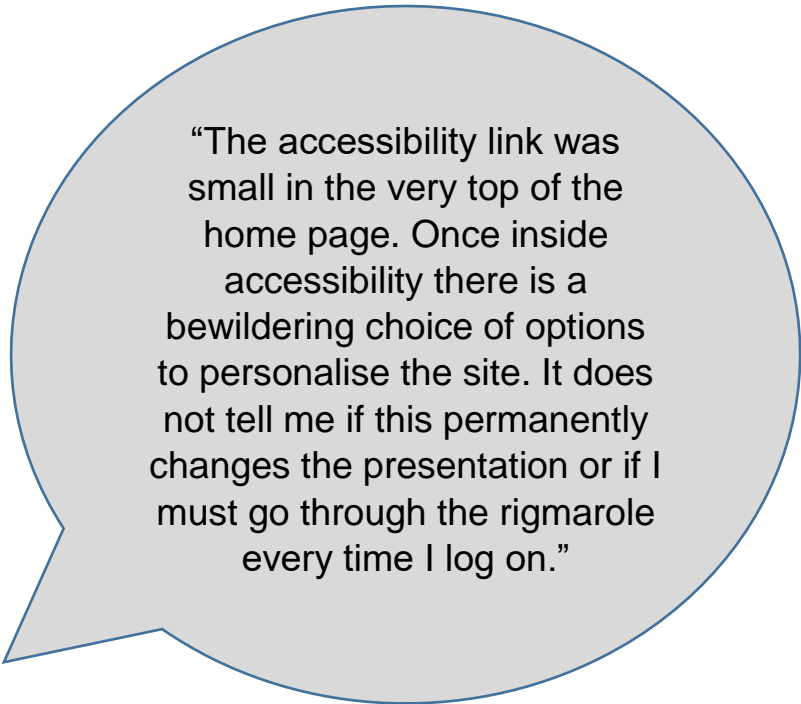
There was general agreement that an option to accept necessary cookies only was the preferred option.

Accessibility

The majority of the group was not aware of the accessibility toolbars available on all the websites and did not recognise the icon. Those who did use that option found it complicated and were only interested in increasing the text size.

When different options (eg. such as having the text read out aloud) were tried

most of the testers found the controls in the toolbars confusing.



“The accessibility link was small in the very top of the home page. Once inside accessibility there is a bewildering choice of options to personalise the site. It does not tell me if this permanently changes the presentation or if I must go through the rigmarole every time I log on.”

Search tools and menu systems

Testers were asked to explore both the search tool and the menu system. The results were mixed – using the search tool to find an application for a Blue Badge was difficult if a full sentence was used but straightforward if keywords were used. This varied depending on the website – some websites’ search tool did respond to a full sentence. Group consensus was that older people may be more likely to search using full sentences if they were not familiar with using digital options.

When it worked the search tool was very effective but the right wording was needed. For example, if “support with home care” was required but “help with care” was used the search results could be confusing.

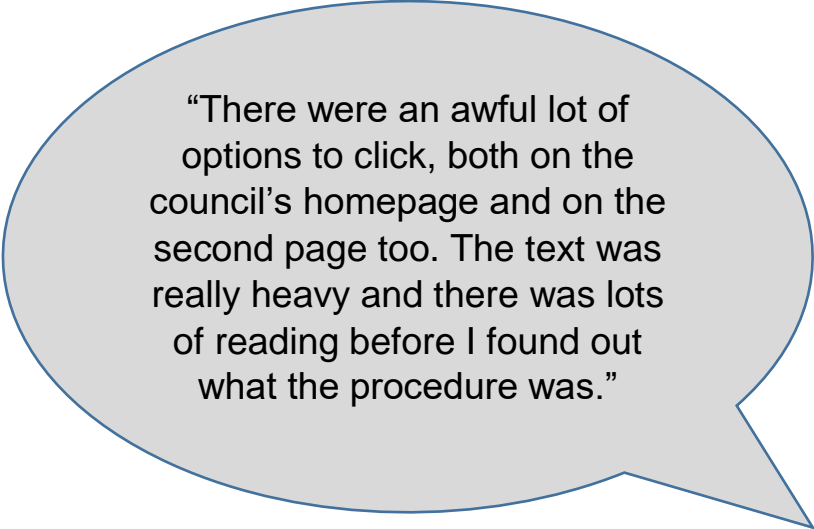
The menu systems were very similar for each website initially but varied after one or two layers. It was important to know where to go on the menu. Like the search, this would depend on the user’s understanding of language/ terminology used. Some testers expected “Apply for a Blue Badge” to be in a disability menu and struggled to find it as it is generally classed as “Roads and Parking”.

Navigating through the menu or individual pages was sometimes a challenge. Some testers failed to find the first menu button if it was not included on the first page of options – requiring a click on “more services.”

This might be the type of barrier to discourage infrequent users. Rather than a button or arrow labelled more services a prominent label with “Can’t see what you are looking for? Click here” would be less likely to be missed.

Not knowing to scroll down a page if what is being sought does not appear on the visible screen can also be a barrier – a prompt to scroll down would be useful.

Relevance and presentation of the information.



“There were an awful lot of options to click, both on the council’s homepage and on the second page too. The text was really heavy and there was lots of reading before I found out what the procedure was.”

The consensus was that once through the layers to the correct page information was good.

However, this was not always the case. Sometimes there was too much information or choice leading to potential confusion.

Presentation was very variable – most websites have a similar look to the Home page (grid

system of buttons for specific issues/ departments) - the next levels are all quite different.

The same website can have different styles and layout 2 or 3 layers in. Sometimes the next layer opened in a new window or another website which added to confusion.

The most obvious complaint was that text size was too small on some websites. Changing the text size or zooming in to change screen resolution created other problems with scrolling up and down or from side to side.

Most of the testers used a laptop but also tried some of the tasks on a phone or a tablet – scrolling and zooming can be much easier but this depends on the users' skills and confidence.

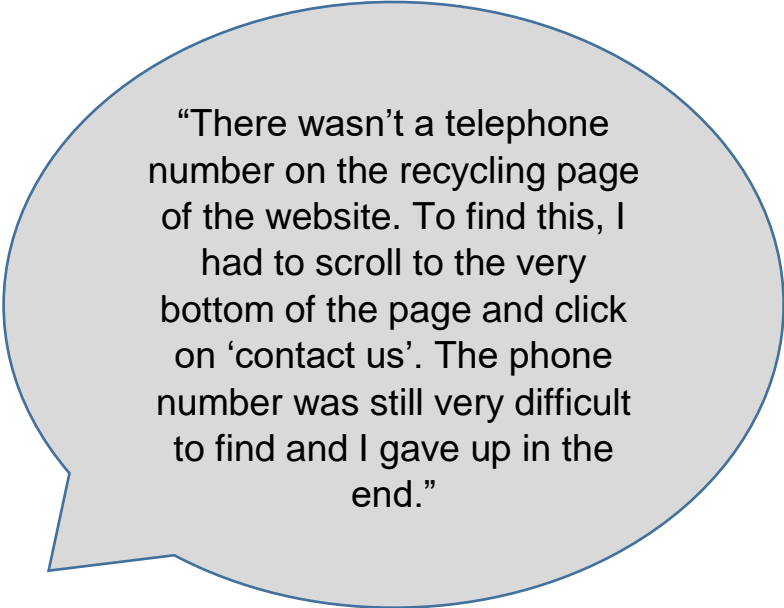
The participants felt that there was a divide in the tone of presentation - some sites were friendly and welcoming others were more business-like.

It was felt that websites needed to have a friendly voice, particularly if the reason for searching was a cause of stress – eg. Needing support with social care or reporting changes to circumstances.

There was particular praise for sites which used video to explain a process or provide advice.

Non digital options

Most websites provided a contact phone number in the footer. To find this the user would need to scroll down and find “contact us” which wasn't always easy for some testers. Inexperienced users may not know to go to the bottom of the page. This contact number was not always



“There wasn't a telephone number on the recycling page of the website. To find this, I had to scroll to the very bottom of the page and click on 'contact us'. The phone number was still very difficult to find and I gave up in the end.”

specific to a department but was a general number.

When clicking on “contact us” there were some occasions when the link would go round in a circle and the tester was returned to the digital option as a contact.

Some websites had a phone number prominently displayed on the relevant page or a link to a directory of phone numbers. This was much more preferable.

None of the phone numbers were tested; however, from discussions in Workshop 1 several examples were provided of using a phone number
Example 1:

- Query made by email to ask about election hustings query.
- Reply advised phoning to clarify.
- The tester spoke to a council employee who was not able to answer the question.
- Put on hold while more information was sought.
- The council employee returned and the tester was advised to try emailing.
- Given the original email address.

This seemed to be an example of staff not being prepared or trained to deal with phone calls.

Example 2:

- Tester phoned their council to order a new bin
- Went into a menu system
- Worked through the options
- Then put on hold for 15 minutes
- Spoke to a council employee – explained the problem and what was required – gave all details.
- Was informed that the matter would be dealt with within a week
- Matter was not resolved within a week – phoned back and went through the same process.
- Had to make several phone calls over 3 months before the issue was resolved.
- Had to repeat all details and the reason for the call each time

The group raised the concern that staff may not expect or be expected to have to deal with a phone call as the assumption is that everyone can use the website. This may be a training and skills deficit which is not being addressed.

Conclusions

The group recognises the importance of digital participation and what it can provide.

- Potential to improve lives and improve circumstances for people as they grow older
- Potential to improve the way inequality is tackled
- Provide more support more effectively and in an appropriately targeted way
- How we engage with any platform is changing and the hope is that it will become easier

There is a need to understand that the digital divide is not binary - digitally included v digitally excluded. It is certainly the case that there are older people who do not wish to have to use digital services and, either, depend on others when it is required or do not engage. It is also the case that many older people are moving to online platforms to stay connected because they feel they need to. They may lack confidence or depend on others to resolve any difficulties but they are attempting to use digital services. The Panel feels that it is very important that this group is encouraged and supported.

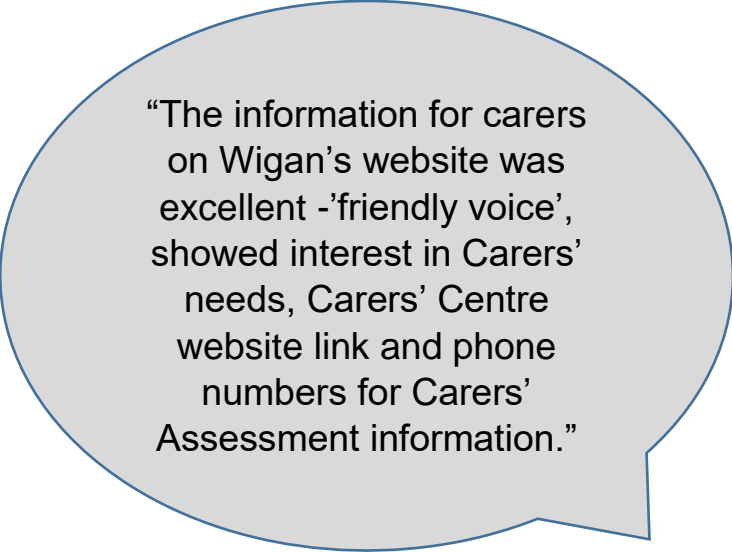
Identifying potential barriers is key as, often what may be considered, a trivial or minor problem can present a major barrier. The majority of the testers are familiar with using websites and do not consider themselves lacking in confidence; however, they found some of the tasks to be more difficult than they expected.

The Panel is keen to build relationships with councils to ensure that residents can engage in ways that work for them, whether that is improving the digital experience, supporting people to have a go at the digital option or guaranteeing a viable non-digital option.

The Panel queried how the websites are designed or changes implemented. Is there any co-production with user groups more at risk of digital exclusion?

Websites can always be made easier to use but it can be a challenge to understand the range of what works and doesn't work for older people. The search tool is an example of this – the most effective way to use it is

with keywords but many older people may input a sentence or ask a question.



“The information for carers on Wigan’s website was excellent - ‘friendly voice’, showed interest in Carers’ needs, Carers’ Centre website link and phone numbers for Carers’ Assessment information.”

The panel found presentation an issue in some websites but found what worked was:

- a friendly voice
- clear good sized text
- well laid out
- minimal cluttering
- change through a menu made more consistent
- accessibility tools easier to use
- an appropriate phone number prominently placed

The Panel is keen to know how realistic any proposed changes might be:

Can menus be improved - be arranged in a themed way? Reflecting frequency of use or set themes/ alphabetical?

Is it possible for different layouts to be available so that a streamlined, larger text or dementia friendly version can be selected at the start?

As part of any discussion non-digital options need to be assessed.

GM Older People’s Network published “Housing options: information for older people”⁸ in April 2022 a report on how housing options are accessed in each council – the findings of that report echo some of the experiences highlighted by the group. The Panel and the Network are exploring how they can collaborate to follow up on these initial pieces of work.

One of the concerns not analysed was how information is shared in a Digital by Default culture. The group discussed the postcode lottery of non-digital sources for service changes, important information, events, activities, support and advice. There is a need to think about how information is disseminated if it is not only available online.

⁸ GMOPN’s Housing Options: information for older people – Apr 22:
https://www.gmopn.org.uk/files/ugd/0e9a67_be499c6fd41c4b3d83f6c8dfda647d15.pdf

What this report aims to highlight is that, while it continues to be important to provide and improve non-digital options, many older people are willing to dip a toe into the digital world and need to be involved when decisions are being made on how that is presented or accessed.

With the advent of more AI based solutions there will be opportunities to improve interfaces – co-design is essential to avoid an ever increasing digital divide.

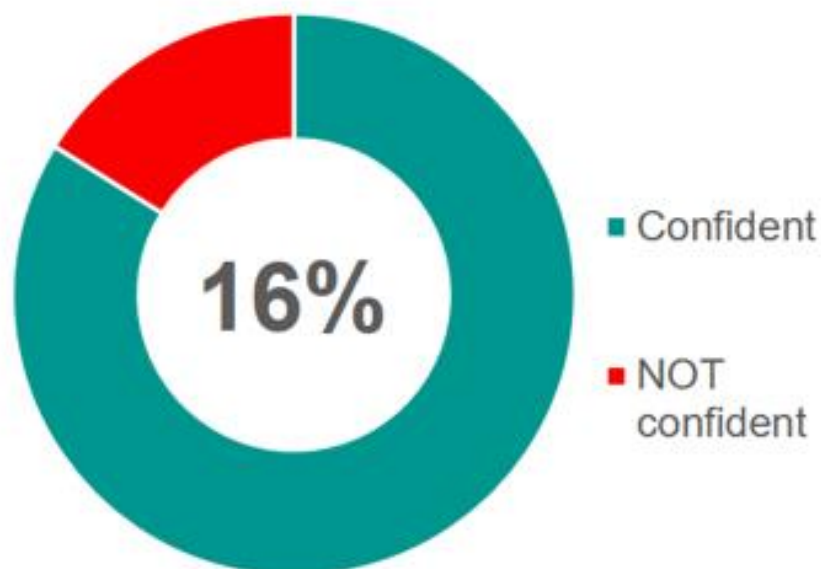
Appendices

Appendix I

GM Resident Survey

Digital inclusion measures (March – July 2023)

Confidence



) ... of households have someone (respondent or others) who is not confident in using digital services online

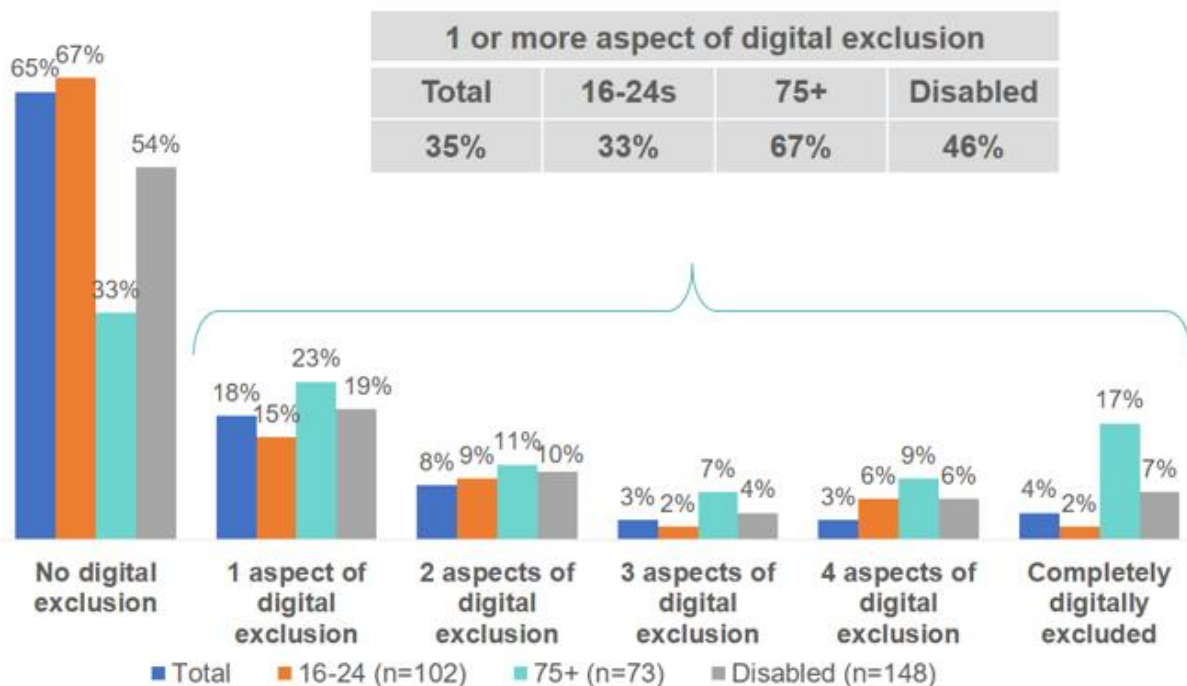
However, there are key differences for GM's priority cohorts, as follows...

44%	28%	10%
Aged 75+	Disabled respondents	Aged 16-24

One or more aspects of digital exclusion

Over a third (35%) of respondents have selected that either they or someone else in their household is digitally excluded in some way. This rises to over two thirds for respondents aged 75+ and nearly half for disabled respondents

Number of aspects of digital exclusion experienced*



Unweighted base: 751 (Telephone respondents: S6+S7+S8) *Aspects of digital exclusion = consistent and reliable access to an internet connection at home; to devices that allow access to the internet; affording access to the internet; skills needed to access and use digital services online; support needed to access and use digital services online

Many thanks to the testing team:

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