



Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru
Older People's Commissioner for Wales



Ensuring access to information and services in a digital age:

Summary of responses from local authorities and health boards

September 2022

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales is an independent voice and champion for older people throughout Wales.

The Commissioner is taking action to protect older people's rights, end ageism and age discrimination, stop the abuse of older people and enable everyone to age well.

The Commissioner is working for a Wales where older people are valued, rights are upheld and no-one is left behind.

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Introduction

The increasing use of digital technology means that the ways in which we access services and information, and the ways we communicate, have changed significantly in recent years.

The Covid-19 pandemic saw public bodies throughout Wales utilise the internet to deliver their services and provide information digitally, however, the pandemic also highlighted a stark digital divide in Wales and many older people struggled to access information and services.

In response to this significant shift in the ways services were being delivered, the Commissioner issued guidance to local authorities and health boards in November 2021 – ‘Ensuring access to information and services in a digital age’ – which set out the kinds of action they should be taking so that people who can’t (or don’t wish to) get online have ways to access the information and services they need via non-digital means, and to support older people to get online.

The guidance was developed in partnership with older people and key stakeholders and has been issued under Section 12 of the Commissioner for Older People (Wales) Act 2006, which means that local authorities and health boards must have regard for the guidance in discharging their functions.

Within the Guidance, the Commissioner identified that the right to access information is a key element of the broader right to freedom of expression and is protected across several human rights instruments, including the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Human Rights Act 1998.

The Guidance clarifies that any move to digital services must be accompanied by measures to ensure that the human rights of older people are protected and that they are enabled to access information and get to the services they need by offline channels, or should they choose, are supported to gain the skills and confidence to be able to connect online. Examples of good practice already underway in some parts of Wales to both ensure non-digital access to information and services as well as initiatives to support older people to get online safely were also included in the Guidance.

A proforma was issued with the Guidance which local authorities and health boards were asked to complete and return. The first section sought to capture examples of the measures currently in place to provide access to information by non-digital means as well as any plans to facilitate or enhance access in the future, while the second sought to capture examples of the measures currently in place to enable and support older people to get online as well as any plans to further support older people to gain the skills and confidence to operate online in the future.

The following provides an overview of the types of measures adopted by local authorities and health boards.

Part 1a - Accessing information and services by non-digital means

The responses received acknowledged that the restrictions and measures put in place due to Covid-19 had impacted on how the public, particularly older people not online, had been able to access information.

Local Authorities

Responses from the local authorities identify how they quickly instigated a range of non-digital routes to reach out to older people so that they knew how to get in contact with the authority as well as providing a means of sharing information.

Front line staff were mentioned by all the local authorities as providing and facilitating critical access to information, services and support.

Leaflets, booklets and newsletters

Most local authorities mentioned the production of hard copy information leaflets, booklets and newsletters in their responses, which are often distributed through established groups or left at information points at community hubs or centres, placed in local shops or provided through the mobile library service. Some also mentioned that information leaflets were either posted out directly to home addresses or inserted in food parcels for delivery.

Telephone contact

Telephone access, initially disrupted by the 'work from home' restrictions, was also quickly re-established by most authorities either through their central 'Contact Us' service or a Single Point of Access or similar.

Community Hubs

Several authorities stated they had set up local Community Hubs to serve as an information point and provide further details about accessing support, either by telephone or in a pre-arranged face-to-face meeting.

Public screens / posters

Several authorities mentioned the use of large public screens and posters in town centres to share contact details and Covid-19 information.

Library Service

Many local authorities referred to their library services – most had adapted to provide a mobile library service, and some had developed a home delivery service during the lockdowns. Where library buildings were now re-opening, staff were serving as information points and facilitators.

Carers Support hubs and networks

Some local authorities mentioned the establishment of Carers Support hubs and Networks to offer further help and peer group support to Carers.

Day Centres / Lunch Clubs

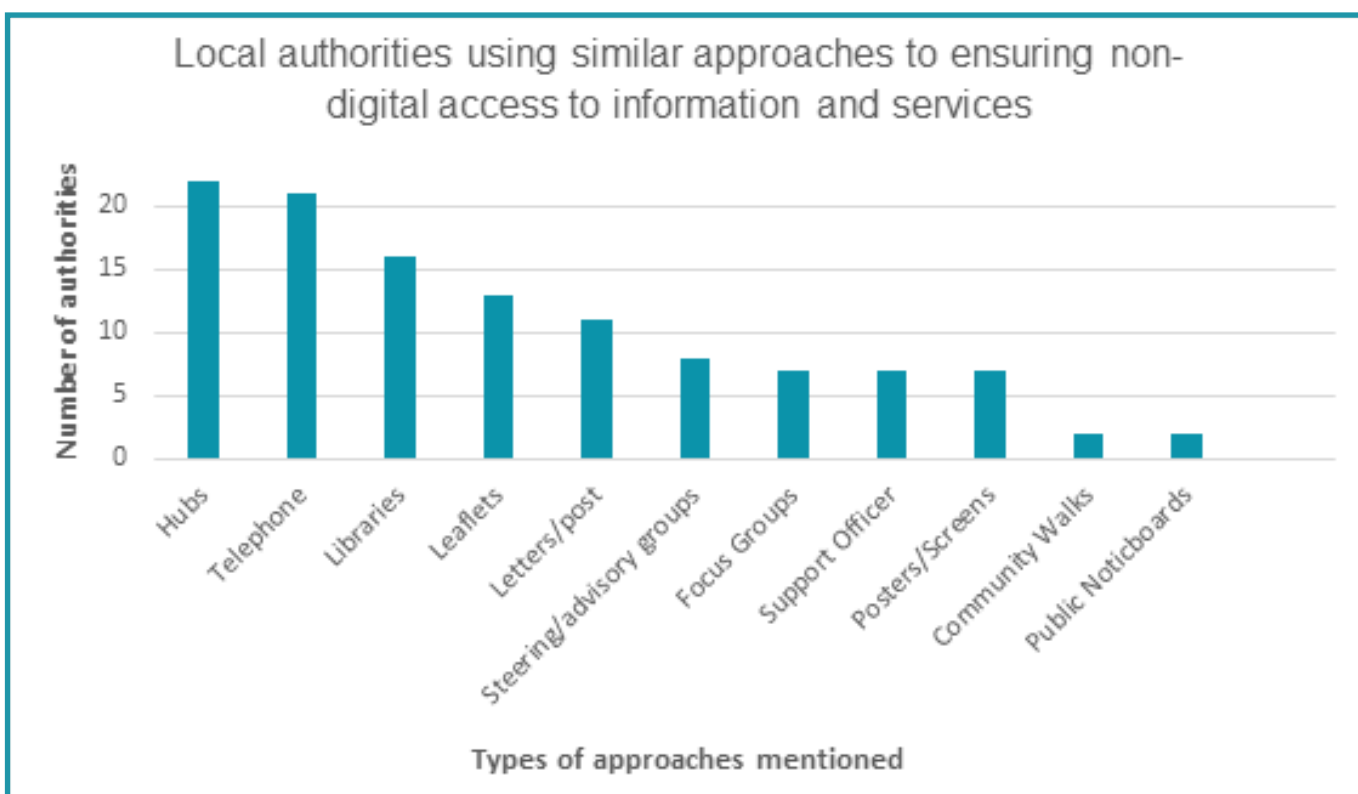
Several local authorities mentioned maintaining Day Centres and subsidised lunch club facilities – enabling groups to meet and providing a nutritious meal, whilst also providing opportunities to share information and advice. During fine weather, Community walks were also utilised to share information.

Engagement Officers / Community Connectors / Dedicated Support Officers

Several local authorities mentioned dedicated staff who were actively engaged with older people’s advisory groups, focus groups, steering groups and established 50+ forums. Several mentioned that they were currently undertaking consultations and surveys with those groups and other community-based groups and activities, such as walking groups, to inform the authorities’ work on Age-friendly Communities.

Partnership Working

Most local authorities mentioned strong partnership working, including work with third sector agencies and joint working with health boards in providing well-being services and information.



Health Boards

Newsletters, Letters, Information Leaflets

All health boards reported providing printed material, such as appointment letters and information leaflets, which were also available in easy-read and large print versions. Several also mentioned the production of newsletters (some condition specific) as a means of sharing information with patients.

Most commented that information leaflets were made widely available at primary, community and secondary care settings.

Telephones – Helplines

All the health boards provided telephone access for people to book appointments, as well as a helpline for general enquiries and assistance. A further telephone service was also mentioned by several health boards, which allowed patients to provide feedback or complete outcome questionnaires.

Face-to-face appointments / Home visits

Whilst it was acknowledged that the pandemic generally disrupted the face-to-face appointment system, most health boards reported that they maintained some home visiting via bespoke services for patients that were housebound, some through either Primary Care nurses or District nurses.

Third Sector support / Information hubs

Several health boards referred to the support provided by third sector agencies, particularly in hospital settings. These agencies, often alongside information and support services or hubs located at the hospitals, engage with patients and support them in accessing information, literature on particular health conditions, information about claiming benefits as well as details of other services and organisations located locally.

Third sector agencies were also mentioned by some health boards as being instrumental in providing support via home discharge services.

Partnership working / Community Groups / Networks

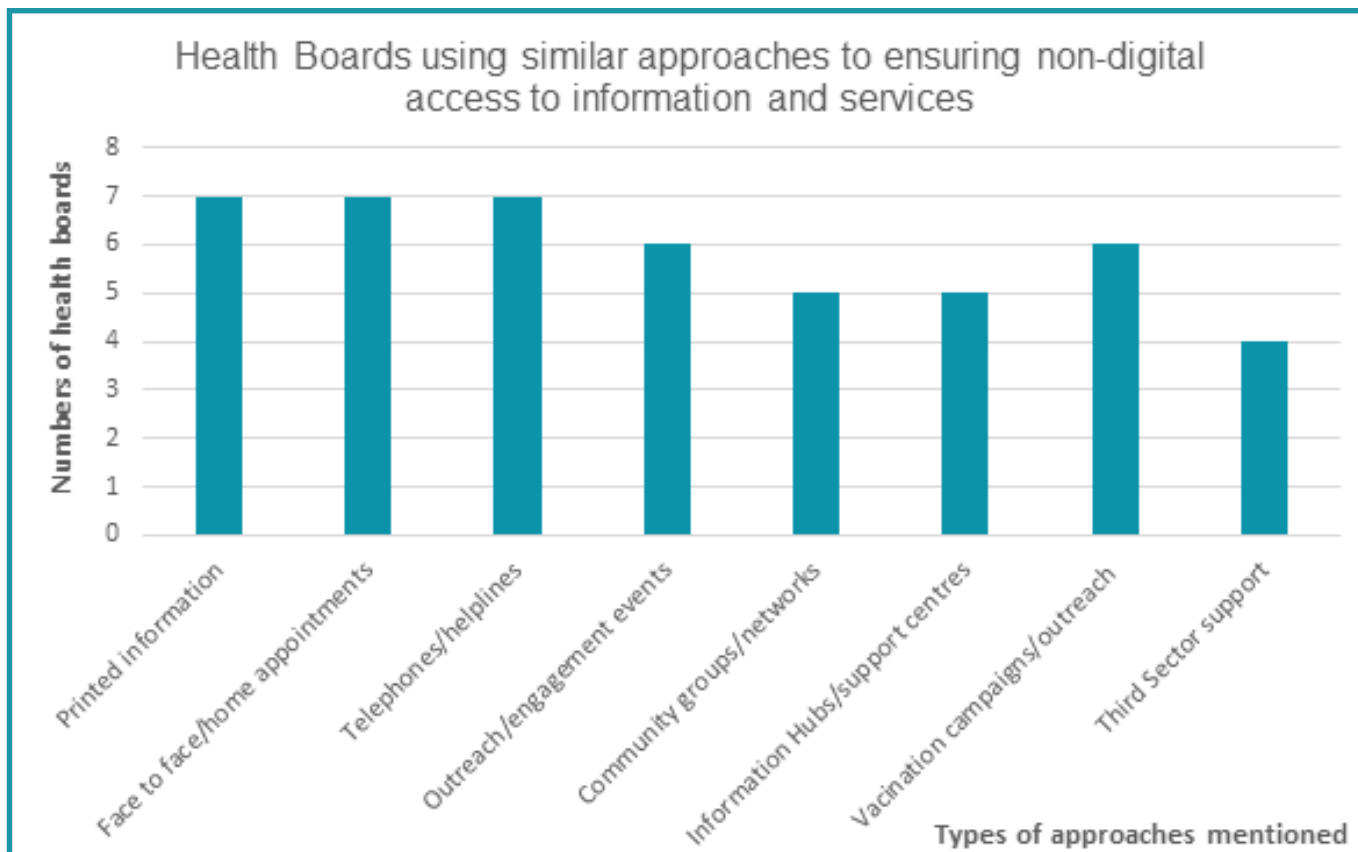
Some health boards commented on the strengthening of relationships with local authorities, elected representatives and the wider public sector to improve the reach of communications and messaging.

Several also mentioned their strengthening of relationships with established local community groups, networks and 50+ forums.

Outreach work and information campaigns

Health boards commented on the wide range of channels used to inform about the vaccination programme which included newspaper articles, radio adverts and posters and leaflets as well as written communication directly to individuals.

Public engagement sessions were also mentioned, which were either held at hosted public meetings or with information stands at popular places such as supermarkets.



Part 1b - Maintaining or improving access to information and services in the future

Maintaining and develop identified measures

Most authorities and health boards commented that the measures they had identified to ensure access to information by non-digital means would be maintained and developed as Covid-19 restrictions were beginning to be relaxed.

Update Information and distribute printed material

Authorities and health boards also identified that information leaflets, newsletters, and details about the availability of services would be updated and circulated.

Increase telephone service capacity

Some local authorities and some health boards stated that they would be looking to either increase the numbers of staff operating the telephone service and/or upgrade the telephone system itself in order to provide greater capacity.

Staff training

Several authorities identified the need to provide staff training with reference to the S12 Guidance, whilst others reflected that it would also need to be considered as part of their wider Equality Plan.

Staff training for frontline library staff was also planned so that they would be able to assist enquirers with finding digitally held information.

Wellbeing activities programmes

Several authorities identified that they would be looking to continue to deliver programmes of well-being activities, walking clubs etc, and would be using them to disseminate information and engage with older people. There was also a desire and an intention to restart intergenerational activities.

Hybrid meetings

Some authorities stated they intend to explore and facilitate making meetings of older people into hybrid meetings, where older people meeting face-to-face in community hubs could also be joined via a digital platform by other older people connecting from home.

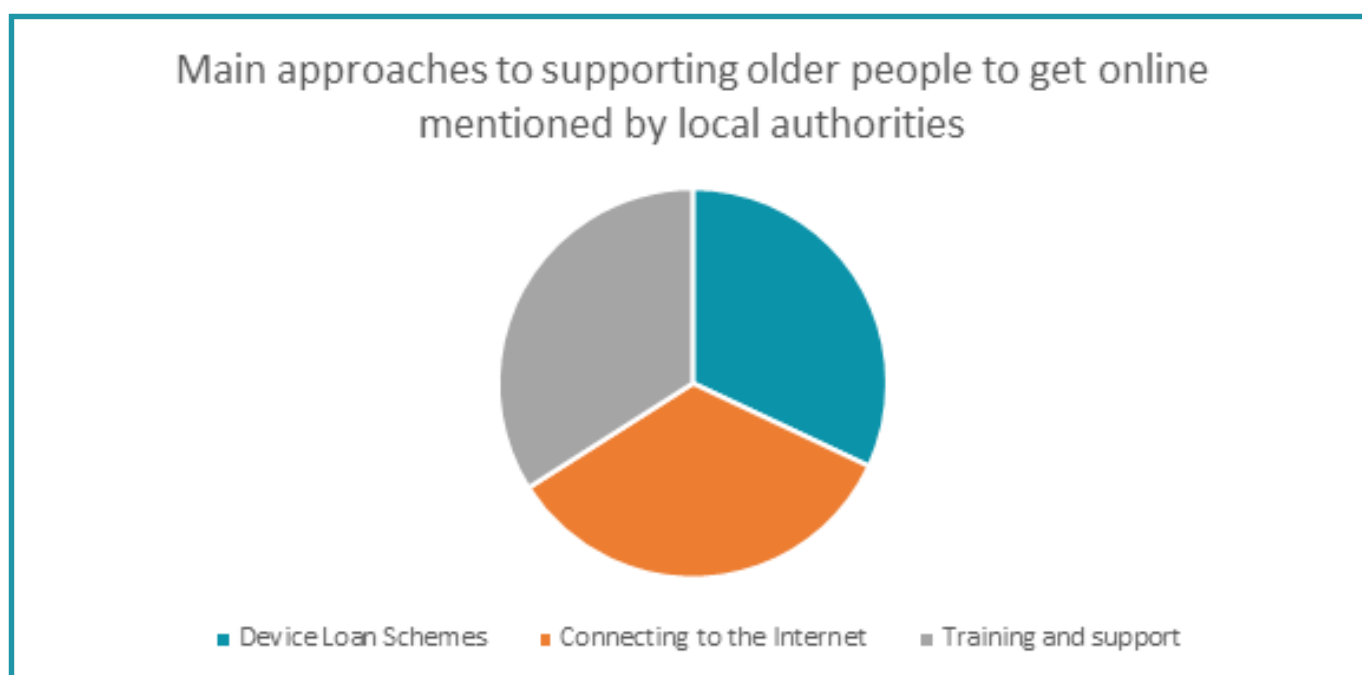
A Strategy for an Ageing Society and Age-friendly Communities

Several local authorities commented that they were already engaged with groups of older people, advisory groups and forums and were consulting with them as a part of the work underway in delivering the [strategy](#). Consultations and surveys were also being undertaken with older people about the changes that were needed in order to become more age friendly.

Part 2a – Enabling and supporting older people to get online

Local Authorities

Three main approaches to enabling and supporting older people to get online were identified by local authorities: providing a device on loan, assistance with connecting to the internet, and the provision of initial training and ongoing support so that older people can gain confidence and stay safe when online.



Device Loan Schemes

Most local authorities mentioned having a device loan scheme in operation where devices were issued to care homes, sheltered housing or to individuals. Some authorities mentioned that the schemes were administered by local libraries where public access computers were also made available, and others mentioned a 'try before you buy' approach.

Connecting to the internet

Several authorities stated that they have increased the availability of their wi-fi access in public buildings and some are providing further free access in town centres. It was also stated that devices were sometimes provided with pre-loaded wi-fi dongles (Mi-fi) where connectivity was a problem.

Training and support

Training courses and ongoing support for older people to become proficient and confident in using their devices, often supported by digital champions or buddies, were mentioned by most local authorities.

Training for front line staff to become digital champions was also mentioned by several local authorities, as was the recruitment of volunteer champions or buddies.

Other measures

Assisted Digital

Several authorities identified providing a telephone support service to assist with the completion of online applications, for example Blue Badge applications, or to provide advice and assistance when there were concerns about online safety issues.

Several mentioned that face-to-face assistance was also available at the library.

Community Hubs

'Re-vitalised' community hubs were mentioned by several local authorities as being used to support access to getting online through providing space and equipment for Adult Community Learning courses and bespoke support sessions run by voluntary sector organisations.

Funding

Some authorities mentioned using various grant schemes to fund the purchase of equipment and connectivity, and provide support, such as the Regional Transformation Fund. Others mentioned the Loneliness and Isolation Fund, the Carers Support Fund and the Community Inclusion Grant

Community Broadband Projects

Some of the more rural local authorities mentioned the work underway to bring broadband connectivity to some of the more rural communities by accessing funding through the UK Government's Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme.

Forums, Groups and Advisory Panels

Several local authorities mentioned work underway with older people's groups, forums and advisory panels as they undertake surveys and consultations to inform planning in support of Age Friendly Wales: Our Strategy for an Ageing Society.

Some also mentioned the eight domains of the World Health Organisation Age-friendly Communities and the need to include questions about digital inclusion/exclusion.

Digital Strategies

Digital strategies have been developed by several local authorities and steps to tackle digital exclusion were mentioned as being highlighted within them.

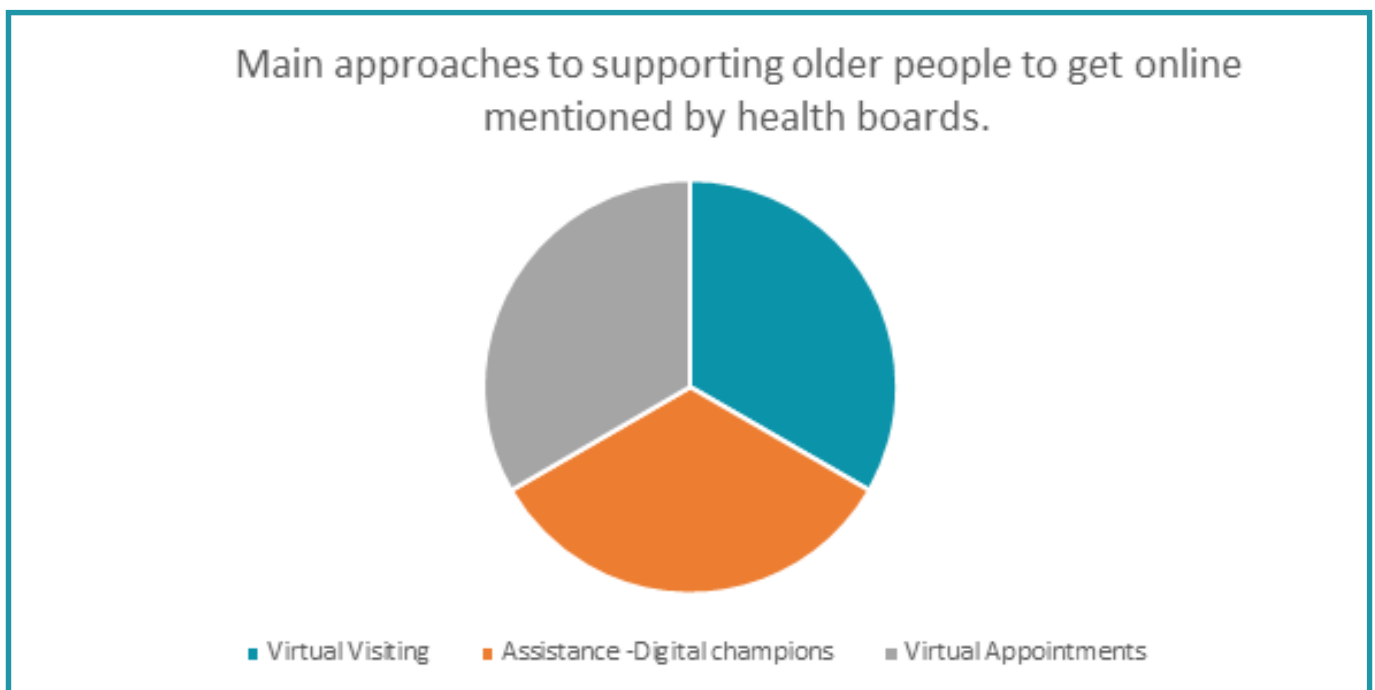
Partnership working

Most authorities referred to the partnership work that was ongoing with the voluntary sector in delivering support for older people to get online.

Health Boards

Three main approaches to supporting older people to get online were mentioned by health boards:

- establishing and supporting virtual visiting on hospital wards.
- ensuring assistance (digital champions) were available for patients either from staff or volunteers; and
- establishing virtual appointments and providing support for patients to engage.



Virtual Visiting

All health boards referred to establishing a virtual visiting service during the pandemic. Devices were made available on wards and older patients who needed support were assisted by either a member of staff or a volunteer digital buddy to be able to connect virtually with families and friends.

Assistance – Digital Champions

Each health board mentioned the support made available to patients who were engaging in a virtual visit – the support was undertaken by various personnel in different health boards, including a ward befriender volunteer, a patient experience team member, and a hospital chaplain.

Some health boards spoke of voluntary sector agencies providing support at hospital settings and signposting to further digital support available at libraries and other courses provided in the community. Voluntary sector agencies were also mentioned as providing volunteer digital

champions, and one health board mentioned having set up a connection with Barclays Digital Eagles.

Virtual Appointments

Most health boards mentioned the rollout of the NHS Wales video consultation service 'Attend Anywhere'. Some also mentioned being able to accommodate interpreters or third-party translators without the need to travel.

One health board mentioned establishing a 'virtual receptionist' to provide one-to-one support to patients attending a video appointment. Also mentioned were FAQs and video resources to assist with using the devices in order to connect.

One health board mentioned setting up a Patient Portal which also provided virtual appointments, as well as enabling a self-monitoring arrangement to be set up between a hospital department and patients with specific health conditions.

Other measures mentioned

Upgrading staff smartphones

One health board mentioned that Primary, Community and Intermediary Care staff had received upgraded smartphones that could be used on visits to patients who had no internet at home, providing a means to virtually visit self-help websites, identify local groups of interest that could be contacted and/or show images of products.

Facilitated messages

Another health board described a service where messages from friends or relatives received by email were transferred onto a greeting card and delivered to the patient.

Device loan schemes

Some health boards referred to the provision of devices on loan either to be able to connect with health professionals or to avoid social isolation.

Freeing up capacity

Several health boards mentioned that enabling and supporting as many older patients as possible to engage digitally, and therefore more efficiently, meant that resources would be more available to serve those patients who did not want to engage digitally.

Part 2b - Maintaining or developing measures to enable and support older people to get online in the future

Local authorities and health boards stated that they are committed to maintaining and developing the measures they had in place to enable and support older people to get online and to gain the skills and confidence to do so safely.

Local Authorities

Most local authorities identified that the measures that had proved most successful in supporting older people to get online needed to be consolidated and further developed.

Community Hubs

Most local authorities mentioned plans to further develop the Community Hubs in order to continue to provide technical support for older people newly online, as well as those wishing to learn about getting online for the first time.

Training courses and drop-in help facilities were commonly mentioned, as were less formal 'coffee and computers' sessions. A hybrid approach was also described in one authority with the further development of a network of 'virtual village halls.'

Devices

Several authorities mentioned that they would continue to provide devices either on loan or on a 'try before you buy' approach.

Some also mentioned exploring the use of voice activated devices and virtual reality headsets, and another mentioned plans to increase the numbers of RITA (Reminiscent Interactive Therapy Activities) devices in care homes. Several also mentioned further investment in Assistive Technology for older people to support them to maintain their independence.

Libraries

The provision of digital support through local libraries was mentioned by several authorities, with staff receiving training to become digital champions, as well as providing a device on loan service.

Connectivity

Several authorities stated they plan to continue to expand their provision of public access wi-fi in public buildings and in town centres. Some also mentioned plans to ensure that their sheltered housing was adequately connected.

Consultation

Where authorities had mentioned ongoing consultation with older people, either as a part of their engagement activity under the Strategy for an Ageing Society or as a part of their undertaking to become an Age-friendly Community, they commented that the issue of digital inclusion and what actions were required to support older people to get online would form an integral part of the work

Partnership working

Most authorities referred to the partnership work that was ongoing with the voluntary sector in delivering support for older people to get online and were planning to expand that partnership working to include joint initiatives with health boards.

Health Boards

Several health boards mentioned their intention to continue to develop and deliver their digital strategies, within which there is a particular focus on digital inclusion.

Focus Groups – Patient Groups

As a part of developing those strategies, several health boards commented that they have established (or intend to establish) service user groups and focus groups that they will work with to co-produce systems that seek to counter digital exclusion.

Improve Attend Anywhere virtual consultations

The need to continue to review and improve the Attend Anywhere virtual consultation programme was identified by several health boards, who acknowledged that more support is going to be needed by some older people, either in their own home or at a community hub/venue. It was mentioned that this support could be provided by volunteer digital champions or an employed digital coordinator.

Other measures being considered to make Attend Anywhere more accessible for all, included the provision of free data for consultations, developing clearer step-by-step guidance on usage, providing ‘test’ or ‘try it and see’ sessions to help familiarisation, and enabling interpreters to join a consultation.

Digital Services for Patients and Public

Reference was made to the national programme being developed by Digital Health Care Wales and the development of the NHS Wales App, although it was not made fully clear what steps were being taken to overcome the barrier of digital exclusion.

Partnership working

Several health boards stated they are committed to continuing to develop their relationship with the voluntary sector and the local authorities in their region to identify and support initiatives to address digital inclusion. Digital Communities Wales were mentioned by all the health boards as the go-to partner for expertise and training.

The way ahead

The completed pro-formas provided by local authorities and health boards in response to the Commissioner's Guidance have provided a great deal of useful information about the measures and initiatives currently in place, and those planned, to ensure that older people can access information and services via non-digital means and are supported to get online if they wish to do so.

Much work appears to have been done to re-establish more 'traditional', non-digital forms of information and services following the initial surge towards delivering services online during the early days of the pandemic, something that left many digitally excluded older people feeling left behind. Furthermore, the responses highlight that a range of work is being taken forward to support older people to get online, particularly by local authorities, including support via digital champions and providing devices and connectivity.

The responses indicate that this exercise also enabled many authorities to review what measures they have in place and identify where gaps may exist, which will help to inform and strengthen their plans to deliver against the Welsh Government's Strategy for an Ageing Society.

Many authorities spoke of a partnership approach in moving forward and many have also committed to further engagement with older people through advisory panels and forums in order to plan the way ahead. This engagement will be crucial to regularly review and evaluate the services and support being delivered – and whether these are meeting older people's needs – and to identify where improvements need to be made.

The Commissioner has provided individual feedback in writing to each local authority and health board and will continue to monitor the action they are taking to ensure older people can access the information and services they need. This will include continuing to engage with older people throughout Wales to hear directly about their experiences, and whether they have been able to access the information and services they need and/or support to get online. The Commissioner has advised local authorities and health boards that she will share feedback from older people and may require further information about initiatives being delivered to ensure that older people are enabled and supported to access information.

The Commissioner will also continue to share and promote examples of good practice to highlight innovation and ideas that could be delivered more widely to build on what's in place and support more older people.

Older people are still facing significant challenges, including the cost-of-living crisis, which means it is vitally important that they can access the information and services they need – whether by digital or non-digital means.

Building on what's already in place and taking forward further partnership working to deliver the kinds of action set out in the Commissioner's Guidance will therefore play a crucial role in helping to support older people through what will be a difficult Winter for many.

Appendix A - Local Authorities and Health Boards who contributed to this report

Local Authorities

Blaenau Gwent CBC
Bridgend CBC
Caerphilly CBC
Cardiff Council
Carmarthenshire CC
Ceredigion CC
Conwy CBC
Denbighshire CC
Flintshire CC
Gwynedd Council
Isle of Anglesey CC
Merthyr Tydfil CBC
Monmouthshire CC
Newport City Council
Neath Port Talbot CBC
Pembrokeshire CC
Powys County Council
Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC
Swansea Council
Torfaen CBC
Vale of Glamorgan Council
Wrexham CBC

Health Boards

Aneurin Bevan UHB
Betsi Cadwaladr UHB
Cardiff and Vale UHB
Cwm Taf Morgannwg UHB
Hywel Dda UHB
Powys THB
Swansea Bay UHB
Velindre NHS Trust



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