



Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru
Older People's Commissioner for Wales

Access Denied:

**Older people's experiences of
digital exclusion in Wales**

Progress update // July 2024

**An independent voice and champion
for older people**

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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Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg // This document is available in Welsh

Background

Digital exclusion – not being able to use the internet in ways that are needed to participate fully in modern society – continues to be a significant challenge for many older people in Wales. Tens of thousands of older people in Wales, including a third of people aged 75+, find themselves digitally excluded and increasingly face barriers when trying to access information and services.

In January 2024, the Commissioner published her Access Denied report, which highlighted older people's experiences of digital exclusion and its impact on people's lives. The Commissioner found that many older people are finding it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to access the information and services they need.

Older people described a range of problems due to not being online or having limited digital skills, covering everything from feeling pressured into using online banking, to difficulties booking healthcare appointments, to more day-to-day issues such as not being able to park the car or take part in social activities.

Within her report, the Commissioner also highlighted that the significant digital barriers faced by many older people risk undermining our rights to access information and services, a key element of the broader right to freedom of expression, which 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. In addition, the Equality Act (2010) states that providers of goods and services, as well as employers, must not discriminate or offer inferior services or treatment to individuals with protected characteristics, such as age.

The Access Denied report contained a series of recommendations for key bodies and organisations, including the Welsh and UK governments, local authorities and health boards, regulators and others, and this report provides an update on developments and action since its publication. As highlighted below, while there is positive work across Wales and a better recognition of the need for offline access, far more needs to be done in order to ensure older people and others who don't use the internet can continue to access information and services. Furthermore, the rate of change needs to keep pace with the moves towards ever further digitalisation.

Older people's experiences

The Commissioner's Access Denied report is based on experiences shared by over 150 older people, as well as evidence captured through engagement events and her Advice and Assistance Service. The report includes quotes from older people that cover a wide variety of topics, and their words powerfully demonstrate the realities and impact of digital exclusion:

Financial Services

"I am terrified of doing online banking."

Health Services

"No appointments - when told to phone at 8.45 all appointments gone. Have to phone GP - they phone back. Can't walk into the Surgery. Not able to use the computer."

Parking

"Where I have failed to obtain a parking ticket to place on the car windscreen, I have to abandon my day out."

Digital Skills

"I have a mobile and internet but don't know how the internet works. There should be someone available to teach us."

Choosing not to be online

"At last, someone is recognizing the discrimination against older people without smart 'phones. I am 87 and I don't want one. There are so many things now that cannot be accessed without one."

Action by the Commissioner

Following the publication of her report and calls for action, the Commissioner has taken forward a range of work to raise awareness of her findings and recommendations amongst decision-makers, and to highlight why upholding older people's rights to access information and services is so important.

This has included:

- Sharing the report with key bodies (including the Welsh Government, UK Government, health boards, local authorities and regulators) with a request for information about action they will be taking in response to the Commissioner's recommendations, including follow up meetings.
- Holding meetings with the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Minister for Social Care, as well as engaging with other Welsh Cabinet members, to raise the issues shared by older people in the report and examine how change and improvements could be delivered. (The report has also been used by Members of the Senedd as a basis for contributions to debates and questions.)
- Highlighting digital exclusion and its impact at meetings with stakeholders, including delivering specific presentations on the Access Denied report and its recommendations to the Digital Services for Patients and the Public (DSPP) Patients and the Public Assurance Group; the Welsh Government's Digital Inclusion and Skills Programme Board; and the CDPS Content Design Cymru Community of Practice.
- Supporting older people through the Commissioner's Advice and Assistance Service, monitoring the information and examples shared to inform her work and identify ongoing and emerging issues.
- Raising awareness of older people's rights to challenge poor practice, including through distributing paper copies of a guide about the right to access information and services at engagement events and via partner organisations throughout Wales.
- Using digital exclusion as a key lens through which to scrutinise a variety of policy and practice (such as consultation responses) and contributing to parliamentary inquiries on issues including access to high street banking, and local government finance reform.
- Working with the Centre for Digital Public Services (CDPS) Wales, who are now looking at how their guidance on the need for service providers to offer non-digital alternatives could be strengthened to improve practice.
- Taking part in a CDPS 'Hackathon' which brought together members of the CDPS community of practice (professionals working across a range of organisations and sectors) to explore and identify possible solutions to ensure that older people who are not online can still access information and services.

Responses to the report and its recommendations

There was a positive response to the Commissioner's request for details about the action key bodies and organisations would be taking as a result of the findings, and information was shared by the Welsh Government, local authorities, health boards, Ofcom and the UK Government. The report was generally welcomed, with several responses saying its findings provided a useful platform to consider digital inclusion and that the recommendations would subsequently be discussed in more detail. There was widespread recognition that digital exclusion was a challenge in need of further work.

Welsh Government

The Welsh Government has responded to and engaged with the report positively, and the actions they are taking are summarised below.

- The former Minister for Social Justice and Deputy Minister for Social Partnership stated that the Welsh Government recognises the importance of digital inclusion as a social justice and equalities priority, re-affirming the commitment to reducing levels of digital exclusion in Wales.
- While acknowledging that work remains to be done, they also highlighted that the Welsh Government's 'Digital Strategy for Wales' makes clear that for people who cannot, or decide not to, participate digitally, alternative ways to access public services in Wales must be provided and designed to be as good as those offered online.
- Lesley Griffiths MS, the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and Social Justice (who now has responsibility for digital inclusion) met the Commissioner in May 2024. The Cabinet Secretary agreed that access to non-digital information, including Welsh Government publications, is important, highlighting that hard copies were being used as part of current engagement on the Welsh Government's Culture Strategy. This provided an opportunity to demonstrate good practice in relation to digital inclusion when reaching out to citizens throughout Wales.
- The Cabinet Secretary also agreed on the need for sustainable sources of support for older people who want to get online to be able to do so.
- In February 2024, the Welsh Government developed and circulated 'How to make a service inclusive: Guidance to help the public sector design inclusive services by avoiding a digital only approach'. Produced with support from the Centre for Digital Public Services (CDPS) and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), the short guide is designed to raise awareness of the need to include people who do not use the internet in the design and delivery of services.¹

¹ Welsh Government (2024) How to make a service inclusive. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/how-make-service-inclusive-html>

- The original Welsh Government Draft Budget for 2024-25, published in December 2023, contained a proposal to significantly reduce the budget of Digital Communities Wales (DCW), whose focus is on reducing digital exclusion. Concerns about the impact of this decision were raised by the Commissioner (and other stakeholders) with the then Minister for Social Justice and the Minister for Finance and Local Government, and the DCW funding was subsequently restored. This is important to ensuring that support is available for older people who want to get and stay online.
- A Banking in Welsh Communities meeting was organised by the Welsh Government in March 2024 where the then Minister for Social Justice highlighted the essential need for services to be available offline. The meeting explored changing customer practices and behaviours in an increasingly digital world and the impact on how banking services are delivered within Welsh communities. There was a focus on which groups are being disadvantaged and how Welsh Government and others can best support solutions. This included input from the Financial Conduct Authority.
- An event was also held in June 2024 on the Wales Minimum Digital Living Standard as part of Welsh Government's work on understanding the needs of different sections of the Welsh population, connected to the issue of digital inclusion.
- The Welsh Government has also recognised that the Social Partnership and Public Procurement Act Guidance provides a potential mechanism to support digital inclusion and are due to meet with the Commissioner's team to explore this later in the year.

Public bodies – including local authorities and health boards

There is evidence of good practice being delivered and progress made against the report's recommendations.

- Some public bodies highlighted instances of how they were involving older people in the design of their services through focus groups and public consultations, while others shared more detailed plans or specific projects to do this.
- Several local authorities highlighted a specific Cabinet member with responsibility for digital inclusion, and referenced how digital inclusion would be included and reported on as part of Strategic Equality Plans and annual reports.
- A number of health boards and local authorities told the Commissioner they are undertaking work to increase the accessibility of their websites, in some cases specifically making reference to providing phone numbers for services.
- Work with CDPS and use of the Digital Service Standards for Wales was mentioned positively in some of the responses received and there was also further recognition of the importance of user centred design or citizen-centred approaches and the need to include all citizens.
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- There was recognition of the need to offer older people options to engage or provide communications that were not solely online, and some examples were shared about how some organisations are doing this: one health board referred to a system which enabled them to send paper copies of letters to patients whilst working remotely, rather than sending correspondence in electronic form.
- Some specific problems highlighted in the Commissioner's report are also being tackled: more than one local authority specifically noted that all council-owned chargeable car parks supported cash payments in addition to other options. This had been raised as a particular problem by older people who shared their experiences with the Commissioner.
- Many responses set out the action being taken to help older people get online, including in-person support at libraries, hubs, community centres and other locations and referenced that hard copy information is used to raise awareness of support to get online and access other services.
- Health boards and local authorities also noted that access to hard copy leaflets had been restored but highlighted that, in some cases, partners had stopped producing hard copy information or had reduced the amount available.

Other stakeholders

- Helpful discussions relating to the report, its findings and the ways in which the Commissioner's recommendations can be delivered have taken place with key organisations, including Healthcare Inspectorate Wales and the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Healthcare Inspectorate Wales responded to the report to note a number of actions they are taking, including that they have added new points to cover digital exclusion when undertaking GP inspections, which now specifically ask 'what access arrangements are in place for patients who are digitally excluded, for example older people'. They aim to further develop work during 2024/25.
- The Commissioner has engaged positively with Ofcom, including on the issue of the switch to Voice over Internet Protocol.
- Business Wales also publicised the report at the start of April, highlighting the Commissioner's calls to the private sector to ensure customers who are not online receive equivalent levels of service and reminding public sector bodies of their responsibilities under the Equality Act.²

² Business Wales (2024) Access denied: Older people's experiences of digital exclusion in Wales Available at: <https://businesswales.gov.wales/news-and-blog/access-denied-older-peoples-experiences-digital-exclusion-wales>

Gaps and challenges

While there is increasing recognition of digital exclusion and its impact, along with the need to continue to provide information and services offline, action in certain areas remains relatively limited. More practical action is therefore needed, and this should be delivered as quickly as possible.

The Welsh Government guidance note on inclusive services in conjunction with WLGA and CDPS was welcome.

However, further action from the Welsh Government would be beneficial, such as writing to all of the bodies and organisations it funds to remind them of its expectations in terms of digital inclusion and providing information and services offline, as well as their obligations under the Equality Act, Human Rights Act and other relevant legislation.

Similarly, in its ongoing work relating to human rights and a possible Human Rights Act for Wales, the Welsh Government should consider how a right to digital inclusion, as well as a right to access information and services by non-digital means could be embedded.

Positive discussions and explorations of user centred design need to be translated into service improvements. While some changes and specific projects will take time, public bodies need to assess what immediate action could be taken to improve the experiences of older people who do not use the internet and implement this as quickly as possible.

Some public bodies said that cost implications meant that they sought to strongly encourage people to engage online rather by phone, and it was suggested that if older people did not use the internet, the need to clearly display phone numbers on websites was not relevant.

Although the Commissioner understands the significant financial pressures being faced by public bodies, this cannot be used as a reason to justify excluding older people from access to information and services by limiting access to offline channels or delivering an inferior service, something that often brings greater longer-term costs to individuals and the public purse.

These responses also suggest that digital exclusion is still seen by some as a binary issue – that people are either online or offline – when the reality is that different individuals have different levels of digital skills and confidence that must be acknowledged.

Finding a local authority or health board web homepage and phone number, for example, requires fewer digital skills than browsing a variety of different webpages, filling in contact forms or using chatbots. In addition, when looking up a phone number on an individual's behalf, the easier it is to find this information, the better. Older people have also told the Commissioner that making contact phone numbers easy to find on homepages would be extremely valuable.

A small number of responses suggested that the use of hard copy leaflets and information was in conflict with environmental concerns and a drive for a paper-free society, but environmental concerns do not override older people's rights to information in an accessible format, and steps can be taken to ensure that any materials produced are as eco-friendly as possible.

Some local authorities felt a more consistent approach to tackling digital inclusion across the 22 authorities would be beneficial, suggesting an element of standardisation would help avoid numerous different approaches to solving the same issue. The potential for WLGA and CDPS to do more to support this kind of approach was also raised.

Many local authorities noted the important role of libraries in providing information and support to older people, including people seeking to get online. Reported cuts to library services, including a reduction in opening hours in some areas, may inhibit these efforts and available support in future.

Reporting on digital inclusion and the progress made is vital in order for public bodies to know that the action they are taking is leading to improvements in the experiences of older people and other digitally excluded groups. Emphasis is needed on monitoring the impact of activity. Public bodies said that reports and updates would be regularly presented to relevant committees and internal boards and it will be informative to see how this develops over time and the changes that are made as a result.

Conclusion

This update report demonstrates that while progress is being made and there is a greater awareness of the issue of digital exclusion, much more needs to be done by public bodies and others to ensure that people who are not online or who have limited digital skills are not excluded and that their rights are upheld. This remains an urgent priority as feedback to the Commissioner since the publication of Access Denied shows that digital exclusion continues to have an unacceptable, negative impact on the lives and experiences of many older people.

The Commissioner's team will continue to focus on ensuring that the recommendations in the Access Denied report are put into action, working with the Welsh Government, public bodies and other organisations to bring about further change. This will involve ongoing scrutiny of policies and processes but importantly, continuing to understand older people's experiences of digital exclusion and its impact.

For this reason, we remain keen to hear from older people about experiences of digital exclusion and encourages people to contact her office, whether to seek support from the Advice and Assistance Service to challenge specific issues or simply to share experiences.

Similarly, as efforts are made to tackle digital exclusion across Wales, further good practice will emerge. We are also keen to hear from organisations and older people about what works well and where positive improvements have been made.

We will continue to take every opportunity to highlight the problem of digital exclusion, encouraging everyone to identify and take the practical actions needed to ensure that offline access to information and services is available and is not of poorer quality.

If you require further information or would like to discuss any aspect of the report please contact – Rachel Bowen, Director of Policy - rachel.bowen@olderpeople.wales or Sion Wyn Evans, Policy and Practice Lead – sion.evans@olderpeople.wales



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