

From Policy Commitment to Equal Access: Tackling digital exclusion in Wales



Comisiynydd
Pobl Hŷn
Cymru
Older People's
Commissioner
for Wales

Rapid changes to the ways that services are designed and delivered mean that being online is no longer just about making certain activities easier or more convenient. Being online is now often essential to enable us to participate in everyday life and is increasingly important in terms of equality, participation, rights and independence.

Older people across Wales consistently share concerns with the Commissioner about the impact of digital exclusion on their lives, and the barriers this creates when accessing essential information, services and opportunities.

These experiences are reflected in a range of research and data which shows that thousands of older people across Wales remain digitally excluded, including 1 in 5 people aged 75+.

Older people also remain the age group least likely to possess basic digital skills, while Wales continues to have higher levels of digital exclusion than the UK overall.

That is why taking action to tackle digital exclusion continues to be a priority for the Commissioner and why a stronger, more coordinated response is needed across Wales, led by the Welsh Government.

This paper examines the progress that has been made to date and highlights the issues and barriers thousands of individuals are still facing, alongside setting out the action needed to ensure policy commitments translate into meaningful improvements in older people's day-to-day lives and experiences.

Background and current context

Responding to the publication of the Commissioner's Access Denied report in 2024, the Welsh Government and other key public bodies highlighted a range of action they were taking forward to address the issues she identified.^{1,2}

This included new policies, programmes and guidance, as well as broader commitments to working with partners and networks to ensure the needs of digitally excluded older people are recognised and understood.

Minimum Digital Living Standard

The Minimum Digital Living Standard, which considers whether people have the connectivity, devices, skills, knowledge and support needed to participate in modern society, is increasingly informing the Welsh Government's approach to digital inclusion and is now reflected in elements of policy development, research, measurement and delivery programmes.³

Guidance on inclusive service design

In 2024 the Welsh Government published guidance developed with support from the Centre for Digital Public Services (CDPS) and Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) to help public sector organisations design inclusive services and avoid digital-only approaches.⁴ The Guidance emphasises the importance of accessible, inclusive and user-centred service design.

The Centre for Digital Public Services has also developed guidance on designing accessible, inclusive and sustainable services, including services for older people and people affected by digital exclusion.⁵



Digital Inclusion Evaluation Toolkit

The Welsh Government published its Digital Inclusion Evaluation Toolkit in February 2025, to support community groups and organisations to evaluate the impact of digital inclusion projects and activity.⁶

The toolkit specifically emphasises the importance of evaluating longer-term impact and outcomes, and understanding whether support is making a positive difference.

Digital Inclusion Wales

The Digital Inclusion Wales programme, launched in 2025, provides advice, tools and practical support to help organisations embed digital inclusion in policy, service design and day-to-day practice.⁷ Alongside the national programme, which is principally focused on organisational and systemic change, Welsh Government grant funding supports locally developed projects designed to respond to identified needs.

Public Health Wales practical guidance

Public Health Wales published Working with Digitally Excluded Communities: Practical Pathways to Action and Impact in 2026. The guide draws together research, evaluation evidence and practitioner insights to support organisations to understand the causes of digital exclusion, tailor support to individuals and communities, and assess impact. It emphasises the need for practical action and evaluation, and reinforces the need to judge digital inclusion activity by the outcomes it achieves rather than activity alone.

In addition to these initiatives, the UK Government also published its UK Digital Inclusion Plan, which identified four core areas (skills, devices, services, support) across which action would be delivered to ensure ‘everyone has the access, skills, and confidence to use the internet’.

These developments demonstrate that digital exclusion is receiving greater policy attention and that there is stronger recognition of the need for inclusive service design and clearer standards. There is also evidence of new initiatives focused on improving digital skills, although some concerns have been raised about whether these will be sustainable in the future.

However, the key test is whether this activity is leading to measurable improvements in older people’s digital skills and day-to-day access to essential services.

At present, there remains limited evidence that policy commitments, guidance and funding are consistently translating into better outcomes for older people, particularly for those who remain offline or lack confidence using digital services, as examined in the section below.

Older people’s experiences

Evidence shared by older people – through consultation responses, polling, engagement activity and Advice and Assistance enquiries – consistently demonstrates that digital exclusion continues to act as a barrier to accessing essential services and indicates this is becoming a more pressing issue in many people’s day-to-day lives.

This is reflected in the number of enquiries relating to digital exclusion received by the Commissioner’s Advice and Assistance Service, which have increased by over 400% in the 30-month period from January 2024 to July 2026 compared to the previous 30 months.

Older people’s experiences reinforce that digital exclusion is not simply about online access but reflects a range of interconnected barriers relating to affordability, accessibility, skills, confidence, language and connectivity, as well as wider concerns about online safety and fraud. Furthermore, while some older people welcome support to develop their digital skills and confidence, others cannot or do not wish to use digital services, reinforcing the importance of high-quality non-digital alternatives.

A snapshot of the issues and concerns raised with the Commissioner by older people is included below.



Essential services becoming digital by default

- Older people increasingly report difficulties accessing banking, healthcare, benefits, public services and information as services move online and face-to-face, telephone and local alternatives are reduced or withdrawn.
- Many feel pressured to use digital channels even when non-digital options should remain available.
- Older people continue to express a strong preference for face-to-face and telephone contact, particularly when dealing with complex issues or accessing essential services.

Impacts on health, wellbeing and vulnerable groups

- Digital requirements can make it harder to access healthcare, medications and other essential services.
- The impact is often greatest for older people with disabilities, long-term health conditions, cognitive impairments or caring responsibilities.

Loss of choice and preference for non-digital access

- Older people consistently tell the Commissioner that they want meaningful alternatives to digital services, including face-to-face, telephone, cash and paper-based options.
- Many feel that digital technology is replacing human contact rather than providing an additional way to access services.

Exclusion, independence and participation

- Older people describe a growing sense that society assumes everyone is online.
- Digital exclusion can reduce independence, increase isolation and restrict participation in everyday community life, leaving some people feeling excluded or left behind

Confidence, skills and support needs

- Many older people find it difficult to keep pace with technological change and require ongoing support to develop digital confidence and skills.
- Those without family members, friends or local support networks can be particularly disadvantaged.

Connectivity problems in rural communities

- Poor broadband, unreliable mobile signals and digital "not-spots" continue to restrict access to information, online services, banking and shopping, particularly in rural areas of Wales.

Digital exclusion creating barriers to everyday life

- Apps, QR codes, online booking systems, parking systems and smartphone-dependent services can prevent older people from accessing transport, shopping, leisure activities, banking and community life.
- People without smartphones often feel excluded from services that others take for granted.

Closing the gaps between activities and outcomes

As highlighted above, there is evidence of greater awareness and an increased focus on digital exclusion amongst policy- and decision-makers, which has resulted in new initiatives and guidance, as well as some additional funding.

Yet based on the experiences shared with the Commissioner by many older people, there is little evidence to demonstrate that older people's day-to-day experiences have improved in a meaningful way, particularly in terms of reducing barriers or increasing access to services.

Furthermore, while many organisations continue to offer non-digital routes into services, these routes are not always easy to identify, accessible or equivalent to online services, meaning many older people continue to experience barriers when trying to access telephone, paper-based or face-to-face services.

Scrutiny and accountability

Some data is available on internet use, digital skills, funded activity and the establishment/delivery of programmes. However, these measures tend to describe the scale of digital exclusion or the activity undertaken, rather than providing insights into whether older people's experiences and access to services are improving. This means there remains limited publicly available, age-disaggregated evidence illustrating:

- whether older people can complete essential service journeys successfully;
- whether telephone, face-to-face and paper-based routes are visible, timely and equivalent to digital routes;
- whether digital inclusion interventions lead to sustained improvements in confidence, independence and access;
- which groups of older people are not being reached; and
- whether digital transformation is reducing or widening inequalities.

Without this evidence, it is difficult to judge whether progress is being made and whether older people are experiencing better outcomes. This demonstrates the importance of capturing outcomes-focused evidence and data through ongoing engagement with older people by those designing and implementing digital systems.

Capturing and publishing this additional data would allow greater scrutiny, enabling Senedd members, public bodies and civil society organisations to examine whether policy commitments are producing tangible improvements in older people's lives.

The Commissioner has also identified a number of other key actions that must be delivered to ensure wider progress, as set out in the section below.



Moving forward: action required from the Welsh Government

As this paper makes clear, while some progress has been made in terms of new policies, guidance, and initiatives, a range of further work is needed – both immediately and in the longer term – to ensure older people affected by digital exclusion see meaningful improvements in their day-to-day experiences.

Given the nature of the changes required, the Welsh Government is best placed to take forward the action required, positioned to provide both leadership and oversight of progress while also engaging and working with partners across Wales, nationally and locally.

Although the recently published 2026–2030 Programme for Government does not specifically reference digital inclusion, its wider ambitions provide an important opportunity to recognise digital inclusion as a cross-cutting priority.

Doing so would strengthen strategic leadership and reflect the central role digital access increasingly plays in people's ability to access services, exercise their rights and participate in everyday life.

Building on these wider ambitions, there is now an opportunity to move from a collection of policies, programmes and guidance towards a coherent national framework based on rights, outcomes and accountability.

This would enable further progress while addressing the continuing gap between policy activity and older people's day-to-day experiences.

Immediate action

The Welsh Government should deliver the following practical action as a matter of urgency to respond to the gaps in progress identified in this paper:

- **Require essential services to maintain effective offline access that is visible, accessible and equivalent to digital routes.**
- **Establish national outcome measures to assess whether digital inclusion activity is improving older people's access to services.**
- **Begin publishing regular progress data showing what is changing for older people, including those who remain offline.**
- **Strengthen accountability across public bodies so that digital transformation reduces inequality, rather than reinforcing it.**

National outcomes framework for longer-term action

Alongside the action required immediately, there is also a need for sustained action over the longer term that is underpinned by clear, measurable outcomes for older people.

As highlighted above, a focus on outcomes will help to ensure that the success of digital inclusion support is measured in terms of its impact on older people's lives and experiences, supporting more effective action and stronger accountability.

The Commissioner has therefore identified four key outcomes to provide a framework against which action can be delivered and, importantly, success can be measured, with a particular focus on rights and participation.

These outcomes provide a framework that would enable a coordinated national approach, led by the Welsh Government and supported by its public sector delivery partners, which will be crucial to ensure that awareness and ambitions are translated into meaningful improvements in older people's everyday lives.

Older people can access essential public services through high-quality offline routes

The Welsh Government must:

- Establish clear expectations that essential services must provide effective non-digital access.
- Ensure public bodies regularly assess the effectiveness of telephone, face-to-face and paper-based routes.
- Strengthen protections against services becoming digital by default.
- Ensure digital public service platforms meet standards for inclusive design and accessibility.

Older people can access inclusive, accessible online platforms

The Welsh Government must:

- Require all publicly funded digital services to meet recognised accessibility and inclusive design standards.
- Ensure public bodies regularly test digital services with diverse groups of older people, including disabled older people, Welsh speakers and those with low digital confidence.
- Require public sector organisations to assess the impact of new technologies, including AI-enabled systems, on older people's access to services and take action to address any barriers identified.

Older people have meaningful opportunities to influence the development of digital services during design, testing and evaluation

The Welsh Government must:

- Require public bodies to involve older people throughout service design, including those who are digitally excluded.
- Embed inclusive design and accessibility standards across digital transformation programmes.
- Review existing guidance designed to support public services with engagement relating to digital transformation and enable inclusive design to ensure it is still fit for purpose in a rapidly changing environment (and update / reissue if required).

Older people's experiences and outcomes are improved through evidence-led digital inclusion activity

The Welsh Government must:

- Identify practical actions to deliver the outcomes identified by the Commissioner's framework, including key milestones and timescales for reaching these.
- Establish baseline measures against which progress can be assessed.
- Publish regular reports/updates on outcomes for older people to enable greater scrutiny and accountability and allow progress and impact to be tracked over time.

Conclusion

Wales has made progress in recognising digital exclusion and developing policy responses to address it, as highlighted above. The priority now must be delivery: ensuring that policy commitments lead to visible, measurable improvements in older people's ability to access essential services.

Digital exclusion is not a peripheral issue. As services become increasingly digital, it directly affects whether older people can access healthcare, financial services, information, advice and support, alongside impacting more widely on inclusion and participation.

The challenge for the Welsh Government is therefore to demonstrate that digital inclusion policies are delivering measurable improvements in outcomes and that older people are not disadvantaged as services change.

This means:

- **ensuring that high-quality offline access is protected;**
- **measuring what improves for older people;**
- **ensuring older people shape the design of services; and**
- **recognising digital inclusion as an issue of equality, participation and rights.**

Digital transformation risks deepening existing inequalities, but with the right safeguards, it can instead improve access, protect rights and support older people's independence.

It is therefore crucial that Wales builds on the policy commitments already in place, translating these into measurable improvements in older people's ability to access essential services.

While digital inclusion is not specifically referenced in the Programme for Government, there is a clear opportunity for the Welsh Government to embed it across ministerial portfolios and use the Commissioner's proposed actions as a practical basis for delivering measurable improvements for older people.

The Commissioner will continue to press the Welsh Government to deliver the required action and outcomes she has identified to ensure older people do not find themselves excluded or left behind and can access the information and services they need to live and age well.



REFERENCES

- 1 Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2024) Access Denied: Older People's Experiences of Digital Exclusion in Wales. Available at: <https://olderpeople.wales/resource/access-denied-older-peoples-experiences-of-digital-exclusion-in-wales/>
- 2 Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2024) Access Denied: Older People's Experiences of Digital Exclusion in Wales: Progress Update, July 2024. Available at: <https://olderpeople.wales/access-denied-older-peoples-experiences-of-digital-exclusion-in-wales-progress-update-july-2024/>
- 3 Welsh Government (2025) Towards a Welsh Minimum Digital Living Standard: overview. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/towards-welsh-minimum-digital-living-standard-overview>
- 4 Welsh Government (2024) How to make a service inclusive. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/how-make-service-inclusive-html>
- 5 Centre for Digital Public Services (2025) Designing accessible, inclusive and sustainable services. Available at: <https://digitalpublicservices.gov.wales/guidance-and-standards/service-manual/designing-user-centred-services/designing-accessible%2C-inclusive-and-sustainable-services>
- 6 Welsh Government (2025) Digital Inclusion Evaluation Toolkit. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/digital-inclusion-evaluation-toolkit-html>
- 7 Cwmpas – Digital Inclusion Wales: <https://cwmpas.coop/digital-inclusion-wales/>

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 wants Wales to lead the way in empowering older people, tackling inequality and enabling everyone to live and age well.

Get in touch...

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales
Cambrian Buildings
Mount Stuart Square
Cardiff
CF10 5FL

Phone: 03442 640 670

Email: ask@olderpeople.wales

Twitter: [@talkolderpeople](https://twitter.com/talkolderpeople)

Website: www.olderpeople.wales

Accessible formats

If you would like this publication in an alternative format, please contact us.

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