

Supporting older carers who are digitally excluded

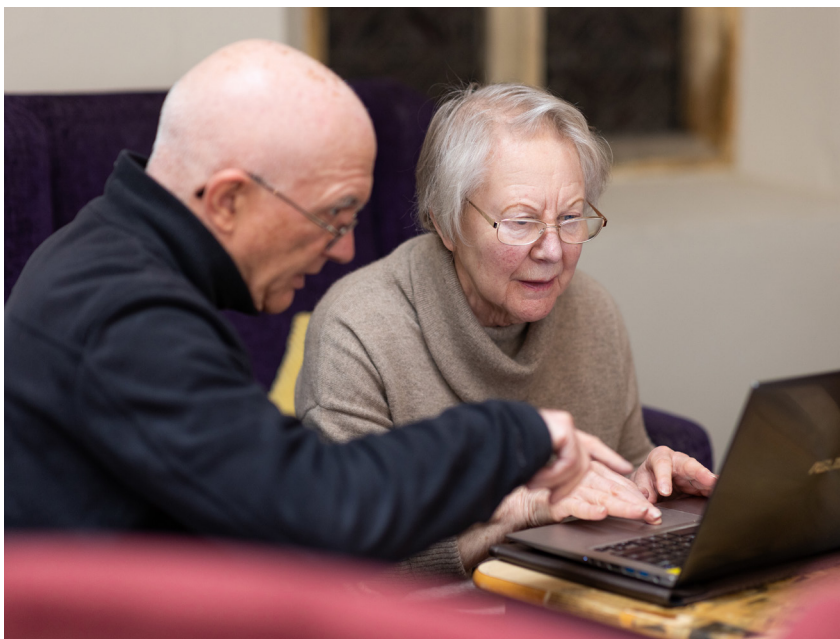
A good practice briefing



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Introduction



Background

Research has found that older people are more likely to be digitally excluded and may not have equal access to the benefits that the internet can offer.¹ As more support services move online, digital inclusion is no longer just about having an internet connection, a device and some basic digital skills: it is about being able to do a range of activities, from accessing health information to communicating with family and family.

The proportion of those aged 75 years and over who are recent internet users nearly doubled between 2013 and 2020, increasing from 29% to 54%.² However, there are still millions of people who aren't online, and while factors such as income and education play a part, age is still the biggest indicator of who is digitally excluded.³ Ofcom research shows that those over 75 are most likely to be offline, with 26% of this group not having internet access at home.⁴

Analysis from Age UK found that the COVID-19 pandemic did not, in fact, produce a sea-change in older people's use of digital technology. While just under a quarter (24%) of over-75s in England increased their internet usage during the pandemic, this was mainly driven by existing users going online more often.⁵ A few months into the pandemic, more than two in five (42%) people aged over 75 were still non-users. Of those who said they would like to use the internet more frequently, a lack of IT skills was perceived to be the biggest barrier.

- 1 Centre For Ageing Better ageing-better.org.uk/digital-inclusion
- 2 Office for National Statistics (2020) *Internet Users* ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2020
- 3 Centre For Ageing Better ageing-better.org.uk/digital-inclusion
- 4 Ofcom (2022) *Adults' Media Use and Attitudes report* ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/234362/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2022.pdf
- 5 Age UK (2021) *Nearly two million over-75s in England are still digitally excluded in a COVID-19 world* ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/articles/2021/nearly-two-million-over-75s-in-england-are-still-digitally-excluded--in-a-covid-19-world

A review by the International Longevity Centre found that older people who do not have access to the internet mostly cite nonmaterial reasons for this, such as lack of skills or lack of interest.⁶ Research commissioned by Independent Age found that one of the main barriers to access was a low awareness of what technology can offer, with people feeling that technology had no relevance to them.⁷

Some research has also found that older people are less confident about using technology, resulting in ‘computer anxiety’.⁸ A study by Lancaster University found that fear of getting things wrong was a significant factor in holding back digital technology use among older adults, rather than issues with accessibility.⁹ The study also found that many older people had wider concerns regarding the impact of technology on society. Research by JRF with older people in sheltered housing found that some people were worried that online service delivery would replace traditional forms of provision, and most saw it as a substitute for human contact which could lead to further isolation.¹⁰

Purpose of this guide

Many organisations supporting carers, such as local authorities or carers centres, have been exploring ways of providing services online, from carers’ assessments and e-learning to peer support groups and online forums. Within the health and social care sector, there have been new innovations aiming to support people to manage their health conditions and live independently. This assistive technology can range from remote monitoring (eg devices that collect data on health status) to personal alarms, smart home monitoring (eg smart lighting) and memory and communication aids. In recent years, **virtual wards** have increasingly been established to avoid unnecessary hospital admissions by enabling patients to receive acute care, monitoring and treatment in their own homes.

However, those who are digitally excluded are at risk of being left behind, unable to make the most of these new products and services and the benefits that digital technology can bring. Many services are now online only, such as the Blue Badge application process. Without internet access, carers may not have up-to-date information on services, or be able to find information or advice. Some carers may be unable to use digital technology due to a disability or a physical or mental health issue, and without alternative non-digital support they may become increasingly isolated.

Cost is also an issue, particularly for people who are struggling to make ends meet and cannot afford to pay for digital devices or connectivity.

- 6 International Longevity Centre (2011) *Older people and the internet* ilcuk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/pdf_pdf_181.pdf
- 7 Independent Age. *Older people, technology and community* cisco.com/c/dam/en_us/about/ac79/docs/wp/ps/Report.pdf
- 8 Czaja et al. (2006) *Factors predicting the use of technology: findings from the Center for Research and Education on Ageing and Technology Enhancement* ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1524856/
- 9 Lancaster University (2018) *Why some older people are rejecting digital technologies* lancaster.ac.uk/news/articles/2018/why-some-older-people-are-rejecting-digital-technologies/
- 10 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2004) *Internet access and online services for older people in sheltered housing* jrf.org.uk/report/internet-access-and-online-services-older-people-sheltered-housing



As digital technology develops, there is often a need to update outdated devices or software. A significant proportion of carers have been impacted by the current cost-of-living crisis¹¹ and are unable to spend money on getting connected.

This best practice guide includes case study examples of organisations who are supporting carers who are digitally excluded. It also includes a series of recommendations across two broad areas:

- **Supporting carers to access online services**
- **Providing non-digital support.**

Glossary

Digital exclusion – when people do not have the skills and/or access to the digital technology they need to be able to fully participate in society.

Digital technology – tools, systems and devices that can create, store, process and transmit information, such as computers and mobile phones.

Online – using the internet to do an activity, such as shopping, banking or communicating with family or friends.

¹¹ Carers UK (2022) *Heading for Crisis*
carersuk.org/reports/heading-for-crisis-caught-between-caring-and-rising-costs/

Carers and digital exclusion



While carers' experiences will vary depending on their individual circumstances, older carers who are digitally excluded may be:

- **Not using digital technology at all, for many different reasons**, such as lacking confidence, not being able to afford devices or an internet connection, having disabilities or complex needs affecting the use of technology, being concerned about lack of privacy or being scammed, not feeling technology is relevant or valuable, not knowing what services are available, and having a personal preference for other forms of communication, such as face-to-face contact.
- **Using digital technology for some activities but not others.** Centre for Ageing Better have suggested that as technology develops, the meaning of digital inclusion will shift and become less about whether you are online or not, and more about what you are able to do online.¹² Some people might be confident about sending an email, for example, but find it very difficult to use online banking. As a result, our understanding of digital inclusion may change, moving beyond having an internet connection, a device, and some basic digital skills, to being able to access different systems and services.
- **Relying on family and friends to help them use online services.** Some research has found that many older adults feel they are not capable of independently using digital technology, and heavily rely on help from family members or friends.¹³

¹² Centre for Ageing Better (2018) *The digital age* ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-06/The-digital-age.pdf

¹³ Haase et al. (2021) *Older adults experiences of using technology for socialisation during the COVID-19 pandemic* ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8074950/

Carers UK research on caring and digital exclusion

In our State of Caring 2022 survey with carers, we found that the main reasons carers weren't using technologies or digital services more often were not knowing what was available (27%), the person they care for not wanting to use technology (25%) and feeling like technology wouldn't meet their needs or the needs of the person being cared for (21%).¹⁴ Our survey also found that carers who were not in employment were more likely to face barriers to using technology, perhaps because they were less familiar with technology or less able to afford it.

In January 2023 we invited Carers UK affiliate members (which include carers centres, local authorities and NHS providers across the UK), to complete a survey about their experiences of supporting older carers who are digitally excluded. 82% of respondents said they currently support older carers who are digitally excluded, 3% said they planned to do so in the future, and 7% said they had done so in the past.

Challenges faced by older carers who are digitally excluded

The survey, based on 90 responses, found that the most reported challenge faced by digitally excluded older carers was loneliness and isolation (83%), followed by not receiving sufficient or appropriate support from support services (80%). Other challenges included not being able to take a break from caring (73%) and the rising cost of living (73%).

“Carers do feel isolated and left behind, especially if they are not able to access information online. This causes anxiety and adds to isolation.”

“Older carers often express their frustration that more and more services have to be accessed online.”

“So much communication is only done by email or social media promotion – this significantly limits those who do not have access to information in this format.”

“With the shift we have seen towards services going online, digitally excluded carers can find it nearly impossible to engage with services effectively for both themselves and cared for.”

When asked what the main barriers are that prevent older people from using online support services, the most reported

¹⁴ Carers UK (2022) *State of Caring*
carersuk.org/media/p4kblx5n/cukstateofcaring2022report.pdf

barrier was having a lack of confidence about how to use technology (88%), followed by a preference for face-to-face, telephone or postal contact (87%) and a lack of knowledge about how to use technology (83%).

“Lack of confidence is a particular barrier, especially when the risk of scams is being frequently talked about”

“Confidence is huge as this isn’t the norm for them. They spend years not needing to do this and think why start now?”

“Many older carers are uncomfortable with digital services and much prefer human contact”

Supporting older carers who are digitally excluded

Some respondents said they are finding it increasingly difficult to access the funding needed to provide non-digital support services, which tend to be more expensive than online support services. Some organisations felt under pressure to make cost-savings, or found it difficult to obtain funding for non-digital support.

“We are being pushed from every corner to become digital.”

“We are constantly looking at ways that we can reduce the ever-increasing costs of our mailouts.”

“Funders are seeking solutions and services which reach ever growing numbers of carers at ever reducing levels of resource.”

“As budgets are restricted, providing online services and support is a more affordable method of service delivery.”

Other challenges identified in supporting older carers who are digitally excluded were a lack of staff capacity to help carers get online, and limited opportunities to raise awareness of support services amongst carers who are offline.

“We don’t have enough volunteers to meet the demand for support.”

“There are also time constraints and offering 1-2-1 support to enable older carers to develop the skills and confidence to use digital devices can be time consuming.”

“We do not have many notice boards or newspapers etc any more. where do older carers go to get information?”

“Promoting information on services and offers, as so much is done on-line/websites/by email”

Despite these challenges, many of the respondents described ways in which they were supporting older carers who are digitally excluded, such as providing face-to-face support, or offering 1:1 technology training. To overcome the challenges of engaging with this group of carers, some respondents described the need to be persistent in encouraging people to use technology, while others spoke about the importance of being patient, or offering tailored and personalised support with technology.

“Find out what their interests are and use this to encourage them to become more digitally aware.”

“Keep trying to get them engaged in using online resources and support because once they have tried it they nearly always stay connected.”

“A one-size fits all approach does not work.”

Other respondents highlighted the importance of continuing to offer non-digital support to those who are unable to access online services.

“Gentle encouragement to try digital opportunities but don’t withdraw non-digital solutions.”

“Look at their needs and do what they need rather than what’s easiest for you.”

“Continue to work on a face to face basis where at all possible.”

“Remember that not every carer has the ability or desire to be digitally aware and we should not be using this as a barrier to them receiving the services and support they are entitled to.”

Case study examples of 6 organisations which are supporting older carers who are digitally excluded are included later in this guide.

Carers UK resources supporting older carers

Carers UK also carried out qualitative research with older carers (75+) who are digitally inactive to understand the challenges experienced by this demographic with an aim to develop a telephony service to support them in their caring roles. Reaching this sample group of older carers (over 75 digitally inactive carers) proved to be a challenge which was largely due to COVID-19 restrictions, including shielding for vulnerable people and closures of day centres which the sample group would have previously accessed. However, the small group of carers that took part in the telephone interviews provided a valuable insight into some of the challenges they had experienced, their current access to healthcare, and information that they would like to hear on a telephony service. As a result, Carers UK is currently producing a range of audio resources for the telephony service which will provide information on financial support available to carers, including benefits and grants, cost of living support, signposting to condition-specific organisations, and information on respite care, breaks for carers and social activities.

“you have to dig very deep to find out information...nobody will come along and tell you. You have to scan notice boards wherever you go.”

– Carer, aged 88

“I can’t nip outside the house...just nip out and nip back...I do all the care...it’s like having a baby”...“I just keep going, I’ve had a new hip and high blood pressure but I just keep going.”

– Carer, aged 79



Recommendations for practice

Supporting carers to access online support services



Considering carers' need

- **Not making assumptions about carers' ability to use digital technology.** For example, just because someone has used digital technology for one purpose (e.g., having a video call with family) doesn't mean they will necessarily be able to use it for other things too. As Age UK explain, there is often an unfounded assumption that a limited amount of online activity means older people will be able to use the internet to meet all their needs. Many services, from GP appointments to banking, are increasingly being provided online but some people may be unable to access these services, even if they are able to use digital technology for other purposes.
- **Recognising that there are many, often complex reasons** why older carers may be digitally excluded. Asking carers about the barriers they face in using digital technology is helpful in understanding their individual experiences. A one-size-fits-all approach to supporting carers who are digitally excluded may not be effective, as some strategies to help older carers get online may work for some people but not others. Not all carers who are digitally excluded will necessarily feel lonely or isolated, and some may not feel there are any benefits of going online.

- **Highlighting the benefits** that using online services will have for individual carers. Attitudes towards the internet are an important determinant of use – holding negative attitudes is associated with anxiety about technology and a reluctance to use it.¹⁵ Some research has found that not seeing digital technology as valuable or relevant is one of the biggest barriers to using it. Carers are often very busy with the responsibilities of their caring role and may feel they don't have the time to spend on digital technology unless they feel it will be of benefit to them. Sharing testimonials from other older carers who have found going online to be beneficial might help increase engagement.
- **Asking older carers what type of online services or digital technologies might be beneficial to them**, and what support they would need to access these. Understanding more about people's individual needs may help ensure that online support services are relevant and useful.
- Involving carers in **co-designing online services** may be helpful in making sure these meet the needs of people who are less confident in using technology.
- Considering the support carers may need with technology as part of a **Carers Assessment**.

Providing training and support to help people use digital technology

- **Recognising that it can take a while for older people to feel confident** about using digital technology. **Providing ongoing, rather than one-off, support** with using technology will help carers build their skills and confidence, particularly when people find technology intimidating or are worried about learning a new skill later in life. The Centre for Ageing Better/ Good Things Foundation suggest that helping older people to get online requires intensive support, and an open-ended time commitment, especially for those experiencing low confidence and facing multiple barriers and disadvantages.¹⁶ Some carers may feel embarrassed about asking for help, while others may not want to do so due to a sense of pride. Some people may find they struggle to remember things from one session to another, perhaps due to memory loss which can be a part of ageing. Using multiple different platforms and remembering different passwords can also be confusing.
- **Offering 1:1 support with digital technology, including home visits**, tailored to carers' individual needs. This might include helping someone set up a broadband connection, or carry out tasks like applying for benefits, using online banking, or communicating with family and friends.

¹⁵ Van Deursen and Helsper (2015) *A nuanced understanding of internet use and non-use amongst older adults*.

eprints.lse.ac.uk/59995/1/Helsper_a_nuanced_understanding_of_Internet_use.pdf

¹⁶ Good Things Foundation. *I am connected: new approaches to supporting people in later life online*. goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/i-am-connected/

- **Holding digital technology group training sessions** to demonstrate how to use technology. Some research has found that creating a supportive and friendly learning environment is crucial in engaging older people in learning new digital skills.¹⁷ This might include offering training at flexible times and in an easily accessible venue; using volunteers to provide assistance during sessions; making sure that sessions are delivered at an appropriate pace for all learners; including opportunities for people to ask questions and turning the challenges of learning about technology into something fun, such as looking at old photographs online, or using an app to play a game or quiz.
- **Follow-up refresher sessions** may be helpful in making sure people continue to be supported after initial training. Providing 1:1 support alongside training sessions may also help carers to embed the knowledge gained in group sessions.
- Running **short informal ‘drop in’ sessions** for carers, to demonstrate online services, or show people how to access and use online support. This might include opportunities for carers to bring in their own tablets or devices, so that support can be tailored to their individual needs.
- **Offering ‘taster sessions’** within existing carer training programmes or social groups, showing people how to use technology or demonstrating online services.
- **Promoting any digital technology training or support sessions to carers who are digitally excluded** by signposting to these when offering telephone or face-to-face support, advertising in newsletters or local media, or attending existing carer support groups to highlight forthcoming opportunities.
- **Running training sessions for specific groups, to address common issues.** This might include supporting Black, Asian and ethnic minority carers who may have language barriers by providing training in another language, appropriate for the local community, or using an interpreter.
- Supporting carers to **address the risks of being online, such as how to identify and avoid scams, or how to protect their privacy.** Some carers may be concerned about internet safety, their anonymity, and the internet’s impersonal nature. Offering practical advice about how to recognise and deal with online scams, and how to maintain anonymity online may help deal with concerns about these issues. Research has found there has been an increase in scams recently,¹⁸ with many scammers targeting older people. Being a victim of a scam can affect someone’s confidence in using technology. Some carers may also have concerns around privacy, so providing guidance on how to avoid sharing personal information, or how to blur the background on a video call, may be helpful.

¹⁷ Herlitz et al. (2020) *An in-depth study of digital inclusion projects for older people living with or at risk of social isolation and loneliness*
connecthackney.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Connect-Hackney-Digital-inclusion-projects.pdf

¹⁸ Citizens Advice (2022) citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/about-us1/media/press-releases/over-40-million-targeted-by-scammers-as-the-cost-of-living-crisis-bites/

- **Identifying local organisations that may be able to help carers use online services, and signposting carers to these.**

Research by the Centre for Ageing Better found that the overwhelming majority of participants in their study were not aware of an organisation that could help them if they needed it, despite the prevalence of local support.¹⁹ Some organisations, including Age UK local branches, libraries, or local authorities' adult learning services, may provide support.

- Exploring opportunities to work in partnership **with local IT companies** to help carers get online.
- Creating resources to help people use online services. That might include **producing a step-by-step user guide** on a particular topic (e.g. how to have a video call on Zoom), **compiling an IT glossary** to explain different terminology, or **creating a troubleshooting guide** to help people solve common issues.
- **Using volunteers to help carers get online.** Volunteer digital champions may be able to work with individual carers to understand their needs and provide support on an ongoing basis. Pairing carers with a volunteer or 'buddy' might also help carers feel connected and less isolated.
- **Peer support groups** may also be a means of helping carers improve their confidence and skills in using digital technology. Because peers are often known and trusted, they may be able to encourage people to use technology. Peers can also help people feel that online services are something that's used by 'people like me', particularly if they feel their age is a barrier to access. Setting up a WhatsApp or Facebook group for people to keep in touch outside of meetings might be helpful, particularly in allowing people to share advice around using technology.
- **Improving staff awareness of issues faced by older carers who are digitally excluded and ways of supporting them.** Some staff may be more confident using technology than others. Offering training for staff who may lack confidence in supporting older people who are digitally excluded may be helpful in improving their knowledge and skills.
- **Considering how digital technology can help carers' engage with their hobbies and interests.** This can be a means of securing carers' initial interest, and improving their wellbeing by allowing them to take a break from caring.

¹⁹ Centre for Ageing Better (2021) *COVID-19 and the digital divide*
ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-07/COVID-19-and-the-digital-divide.pdf

Providing carers with devices and data

- **Working with organisations who can provide sim cards or internet data to those who need it.** The Good Things Foundation has a [Community Partner Network](#) in which organisations who support people in the local community can access free data through the National Databank, and distribute this to those who need it.
- Supporting carers to **purchase devices through Direct Payments.**

Improving the accessibility of online support services

- Following the [Web Content Accessibility guidelines](#) to ensure **that online content is accessible to everyone**, including those with impairments to their vision, hearing, mobility and thinking and understanding.
- Making **websites as easy to use** as possible, so that carers are able to find what they need quickly, without the need for more support.
- Trying to provide information **directly on webpages** as much as possible, as some carers may not have the space on their device to access downloadable information.
- Ensuring that any online services are **inclusive to carers from all backgrounds**. Carers who feel that resources do not meet their needs may be less inclined to go online. Research suggests that carers from ethnic minority backgrounds do not always feel that services meet their needs.
- **Avoiding jargon** and providing instructions on how to navigate to certain pages when signposting carers to online support services. If carers are sent a more general link (e.g. to a homepage) they may not necessarily be able to find what they need. Some people may not be familiar with terms such as 'cookie', 'homepage' or 'filter'.

Offering non-digital support



- Recognising that some people may not be able to get online, no matter how much support they are given. This may be due to having a disability or complex multiple needs, or not being able to afford to go online. Some people may not have the fine motor skills needed to use devices, for example, while others may have a visual impairment. Providing non-digital support can help ensure that carers who are unable to go online are not excluded. This might include **providing telephone befriending support, offering home visits, carrying out activities such as Carers Assessments in person, or posting information and advice resources**, such as leaflets or newsletters.
- **Asking carers** how they would like to receive support. Some carers who are digitally excluded may prefer telephone contact; others may want to receive information by post. Some carers may have English as a second language, while others may have visual or hearing impairments, affecting how they are able to access information.
- **Seeking feedback on whether non-digital support has been helpful** may be beneficial, particularly when it is more difficult to measure participation and engagement with information sent by post.
- **Making sure that peer support groups and social activities are face-to-face as well as online** to engage older carers who are digitally excluded and feeling lonely and isolated. Peer support sessions can be valuable in reducing loneliness and enabling carers to share their experiences of caring and to advise and support one another. However, carers who struggle to use video-conferencing software like Zoom or do not have a strong enough wi-fi connection to take part, may miss out on these opportunities to connect with others.

- **Organising a mix of online and in-person activities**, at a variety of different times, may result in more people taking part. Offering multiple ways of joining the same session, from joining on zoom to being in the room in person, might also increase inclusivity.
- Recognising that non-digital support may be particularly important for some carers, including those who are living in rural areas where opportunities to connect with people in person may be more difficult due to limited public transport. There may also be connectivity issues in these areas which make using technology more difficult. **Proactively contacting carers who are also physically isolated, including those in remote or rural locations** can help ensure that carers do not feel cut off from others.
- Promoting carer support services to those who are digitally excluded by **distributing leaflets** to local organisations, such as libraries, GP practices, community centres, or places of worship, **running a stall at a local community event, or dropping into an existing older people's group or dementia cafe** to promote the services available to carers. Many carers do not always recognise themselves as carers, for a variety of reasons.
- **When running surveys or consultation exercises with carers, it may be helpful to provide opportunities for carers to take part in other ways.** This might include distributing paper copies of the survey/consultation paper or organising a meeting to discuss the survey/consultation questions.



Good practice in...

Supporting carers to use technology

Carers Link East Dunbartonshire

Carers Link East Dunbartonshire has been supporting carers in East Dunbartonshire since 2004. It provides a range of support to older carers who are digitally excluded, including the provision of ipads, chromebooks, and tablets, as well as 1:1 technology training, and online wellbeing sessions. As the local area is semi-rural, many carers are physically as well as digitally isolated, with transport issues making it more difficult to connect with others.

During the pandemic Carers Link East Dunbartonshire received ipads and chromebooks from the Scottish Government's Connecting Scotland programme, to give away to carers in the local area. It also received hardship funds to provide other tablets and laptops. More than 100 devices were delivered in total. These devices have allowed carers to take a break from caring and to connect with others. As well as providing hardware, Carers Link East Dunbartonshire has also offered 1:1 technology training for carers. The training varies according to carers' individual needs, but support is usually provided through up to 6 sessions. The training focuses on the benefits of using technology, and often starts by demonstrating how carers' existing hobbies can be carried out online. Guidance is also provided on how to use video conferencing platforms such as Teams, which many carers now need in order to meet with health professionals.

During the pandemic, Carers Link East Dunbartonshire managed to remotely provide support and, where possible, provide face-to-face training through socially distanced visits. Training was initially provided by volunteers who were recruited either from the charity's existing pool of around 80 volunteers, or through the local volunteering centre. Some volunteers were students, while others were carers who were able to provide support alongside their caring role. Although the number of volunteers has fallen since COVID-19, the training is still provided by the Training and Engagement Co-Ordinator.

Carers also receive support through a monthly Tech Talk Group which consists of volunteers and carers who have taken part in

technology training. The sessions are led by the carers and focus on their areas of interest. Previous sessions have covered topics including using social media, QR codes, smart speakers, and wellbeing apps, and avoiding scams. The sessions tend to be interactive, with hands-on demonstrations to maintain carers' interest and support them to use different technologies in the future.

Carers Link East Dunbartonshire also offers online wellbeing sessions, including mindfulness, yoga and other social groups. These are attended by 12-14 carers, and provide an opportunity for carers to share their experiences and concerns, and advise and support one another. Some groups which were previously online now take place in-person, or are offered through a hybrid model. By using the Meeting Owl app, in which a 360 degree camera provides a view of the entire room, the organisation has run meetings which are inclusive for all carers, regardless of whether they attend in-person or online.

Carers Link East Dunbartonshire promotes the support available through its newsletter, website, and podcast. It also works with other voluntary organisations to ensure that people are aware of its services, and has previously advertised through local media.

Hartlepool Carers

Hartlepool Carers offers information, advice and guidance to carers in and around Hartlepool. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation developed a technology loan service to help digitally excluded older carers connect to their communities.

Having a good relationship with the local authority has been key to the success of the project. After discussions with a local commissioner about the support older carers might need during the pandemic, Hartlepool Carers went on to develop the technology loan service with the support of the local authority. With funding from the PFC Trust, it was possible to purchase tablets, phones and data packages very quickly. There are currently around 90 pieces of kit on loan in the local community.

As well as the loan of devices, support is also provided through volunteers. During the pandemic, when many people were not working, were on furlough or had been redundant, it was possible to recruit several volunteers, many of whom had previously been carers themselves. The volunteers' support has ranged from helping carers to turn on devices and enter passwords, to showing them how to set up emails and shop online.

Hartlepool Carers promotes the project through Facebook and other social media channels, as well as local media such as Hartlepool Mail and Hartlepool Life. In partnership with the local authority, the use of Hartlepool Now proved to be a beneficial way to engage with the community. It also works in partnership with social care teams to raise awareness of the support available.

Through the project, Hartlepool Carers has engaged with carers who were not previously known to services, many of whom were struggling with loneliness. As a result of the support they have received, several carers have become more confident about using technology. This was particularly important for carers who were not living with the person they cared for during the pandemic. By learning how to do video-calls, for example, they were able to monitor the health and wellbeing of the person being cared for, and make sure they were being supported. Some carers have also formed new friendships online which they have continued in person, meeting up for lunch or going on holiday together. There are also a number of online activities and events provided by Hartlepool Carers which carers can join, ranging from bingo to cooking classes and peer support sessions.

Since the pandemic, the project has continued to grow. Hartlepool Carers has built links with the local authority community hub, where digital exclusion navigators provide ongoing support to people. In addition, continued support from the PFC Trust and CDCF has also meant that some devices have been given to carers to keep on a permanent basis. A new community café has also recently been developed: a secure and safe space in which carers can socialise or meet with support staff such as social workers.

Surrey Coalition of Disabled People

The Surrey Coalition of Disabled People supports disabled people and those living with a long-term health condition to be an active part of the community. Its Tech to Community Connect Service provides devices, digital literacy training and confidence-boosting support to people in Surrey who are at risk of digital exclusion, including carers, people who are disabled, people with a long-term health condition, and people from an ethnic minority background who may speak English as an additional language.

Support is provided to people through the loan of a device, access to wifi and data, and digital skills training given by a volunteer 'Tech Angel'. The support offered is wide-ranging and can include anything from help with logging on to guidance

on how to book appointments. The amount of support provided varies according to people's needs, but training usually takes place over 5 or 6 sessions. Group training is offered as well as 1:1 training in people's homes. The training aims to demonstrate the benefits of going online, as well as addressing issues around safety and security. Many people are concerned about being scammed, so the organisation provides regular updates on issues such as phishing.

The Surrey Coalition of Disabled People promote the support available through newsletters and social media channels. People at risk of digital exclusion are also referred from local services such as social care services, GPs and voluntary organisations. It is also possible to self-refer.

Although it was challenging to find people to volunteer as Tech Angels, Surrey Coalition of Disabled People worked with the local university, where some of students were keen to volunteer to gain life experience. It also shared the opportunity to volunteer with voluntary organisations in the local area.

When carers become more confident in using technology, they are able to take a break from their caring role by, for example, using devices to listen to music or watch a programme online. They can also access daily online social activities provided by Surrey Coalition of Disabled People, including book groups, quizzes, and craft clubs. These events and activities aim to reduce loneliness and isolation.

Going forward, although the organisation has been able to secure funding for the loan of devices, it is keen to build more links with local technology companies. There is still a high level of need within the local community. Since the pandemic, the demand for online support has increased even further as a result of the cost-of-living crisis, when some people are unable to travel or socialise as much.

Good practice in...

Providing a combination of online and offline support

Darlington Carers Support

Darlington Carers Support offers a range of different services to local carers, including information and advice, carer breaks, carer support groups and free counselling sessions.

To support older carers who are digitally excluded, a Connecting Carer worker provides advice and guidance on how to use technology. This support is provided during home visits, and is tailored to carers' individual needs. It can range from helping carers to turn on devices and access the internet to showing carers how to apply for a Blue Badge or how to top up the electricity meter online. The support is provided at a pace that suits individual carers, and regular breaks are taken if needed.

Guidance on specific topics is also provided in paper-form, often personalised for individual carers. These guides are written in plain English so that carers are able to follow instructions in their own time. Darlington Carers works closely with Durham County Carers who also support older carers who are digitally excluded. The two organisations work together to share the guidance documents and other resources. Both organisations also run technology training events, workshops and drop-in events. Darlington Carers offers a technology support group, for example, in which support is provided on topical issues such as avoiding scams.

Darlington Carers receives funding from the local council to help carers get online. It also received a donation from a local business for the provision and loan of devices to carers. Carers are also able to apply for devices as part of the Breaks service, and demand for this has increased recently as a result of the cost-of-living crisis. In addition, Darlington Carers has access to the Good Things Foundation's National Databank which provides free mobile data, texts and calls to people in need. Darlington Carers promotes the technology support available through its newsletter and social media channels, as well as by writing to carers directly.

Supporting carers to use technology has a positive impact on their wellbeing. The support often starts with the carers' interests and how technology can help them engage with their hobbies. This is helpful in enabling them to take a break from caring and do something they enjoy. Becoming more confident online also helps carers to connect with the person being cared for or other family members. Being part of a family Whats App group or taking part in a Zoom call, for example, can result in carers feeling less lonely and isolated.

To support carers who are unable to go online, Darlington Carers also provides a range of face-to-face support services, including home visits, telephone support, peer support groups, wellbeing sessions and training events. It is possible to take part in training events online, meaning that carers can participate in a way that suits them. When sharing information and advice with carers, the organisation coordinates different communications channels so that carers receive this at the same time, regardless of whether they receive it by email or post.

Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust

Torbay Carers Service is provided by the Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust, and offers a range of support to carers in the local area.

Although the service has provided digital support for several years, this increased during the pandemic when many carers needed to use technology. Initially, this consisted of a project with Age UK, who were still able to provide face-to-face support during the pandemic. As part of this project, carers were offered help with online shopping or using QR codes.

This project then led to a new partnership with NetFriends, an IT provider, whose staff provided carers with IT support to improve their confidence in areas such as shopping online, communicating with family and friends, and accessing online prescriptions. A personalised approach was taken in which carers were given support with whatever they wanted to use technology for. They were also able to access low level funding to purchase (or upgrade) equipment or wifi. This project is planned to continue with a new provider and Torbay Carers Service is considering how a similar project might be supported in future, for example, by repurposing NHS kit and making it accessible and available to carers. The service has also worked with other local voluntary organisations to ensure that carers are able to use local community hubs to access technology for online healthcare appointments.

Torbay Carers Service provides support that meets individual carers' needs. It carries out a review of its strategy every 3 years, which takes into consideration what support carers need and how they want to receive it. Although it can be costly to provide information by post, there is enough demand for this to make it worthwhile. The service is keen to ensure that support is easy to access. As well as three buildings in the local area, which offer a 'drop in' service, there is telephone support service, and a range of events and activities which are provided both in-person and online. The face-to-face events tend to be popular amongst older carers, who enjoy coming in and having a tea or coffee with other carers.

The service promotes the support available for carers through several channels, ranging from social media to working in partnership with local partners. It worked with the local Healthwatch, for example, to promote digital support services, and to explore some of the barriers faced by carers in accessing online healthcare appointments. There are also carer support workers available in GP practices, providing advice and guidance in person. In addition, Torbay Carers Service works with the Torbay Community Development Trust to ensure its community builders are aware of its carer support services when they support people in the local area. Previously, as part of a project funded by Mind the Gap, it worked with the Imagine Torbay Multicultural Group to promote its services amongst people with English as a second language.

Good practice in...

Providing face-to-face and non-digital support and offline support

N-Compass/Rochdale Carers Hub

N-Compass aims to help people across the North of England regain control of their lives through the provision of carers, advocacy, wellbeing, counselling and volunteering services. Rochdale Carers Hub, part of N-Compass, provides information, advice and specialist services to help carers continue in their caring role.

To ensure that older carers who are digitally excluded are able to receive the information and advice they need, Rochdale Carers Hub sends its newsletter by post as well as by email. It also distributes copies of the newsletter to local places which older carers are likely to visit, including libraries, GP practices, and pharmacies. The newsletter includes information on health and wellbeing, safeguarding, and local support services. Large print versions can be provided for carers if needed.

As well as sending information by post, there is a 24/7 free telephone helpline in which carers can receive support. If some carers, such as those who are hard of hearing, are unable to receive support over the phone, staff can arrange meetings with them in their home or in a local cafe. Rochdale Carers Hub delivers its support services in a way that suits individual carers. It keeps track of carers' contact preferences through its case management system, which also enables it to record additional details about carers, such as whether they speak English as a second language.

Rochdale Carers Hub aims to tailor its services and activities to what carers want. It regularly seeks feedback on its services, and when online surveys are sent to carers, paper copies are also provided by post, or given out at events. There is a demand locally for non-digital support, with many carers preferring to have face-to-face contact with others, so there are at least 30 face-to-face events every quarter. The organisation is able to manage the costs of some of these by working with local partners and using their spaces for free, or for a discounted rate.

The Carers Hub consults with carers about what type of events they would like. Some events are targeted at older carers, such as cream tea afternoons and dementia support groups. There are regular coffee and chat groups, which attract a larger number of carers when it is held in-person, rather than online. Some of the groups are also attended by some former carers, who act as mentors to newer carers. N-compass carers' services are also developing a Friends of Carers network which enables older and more experienced carers to support and advise other carers.

To support older carers who may be lonely or isolated, Rochdale Carers Hub has a PenPal scheme, in which volunteers write handwritten letters to carers who may have enjoyed writing letters in the past.

While many carers prefer to receive non-digital support, Rochdale Carers Hub has a new digital skills training programme which will be delivered quarterly by staff, with the support of the local authority. To support older carers who are keen to use online services, the organisation has access to the Good Things Foundation's Databank which provides sim cards and internet data to people who cannot afford them.

About the project



Carers UK, in partnership with Carers Trust, has received funding from the Covid 19 Support Fund to support the “Making Carers Count” project. This part of the three-year project which seeks to understand the experiences of four traditionally under-represented groups of carers both during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. These are LGBTQ+ carers, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic carers, older carers without access to the internet and carers of faith. This project is pulling together existing knowledge and engaging in new research to more fully understand the experiences of these carers and the unique challenges they may experience in their caring role as well as collating examples of best practice. This knowledge gained will be applied to Carers UK services and shared with other service delivery organisations and commissioners to improve access to and outcomes from support, information and advice for marginalised carers.



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