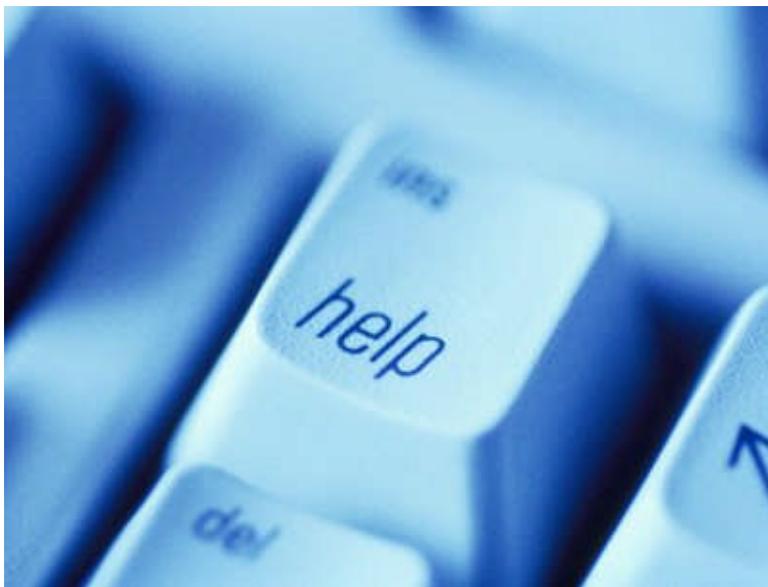


Digital By Default?

Online public services and digital inclusion in Wales



A Bevan Foundation Report

About The Bevan Foundation

The Bevan Foundation develops new ideas about achieving social justice in Wales. We carry out research, organise conferences and other events, and publish articles and reports to help to improve the quality of people's lives.

We welcome support for our work through membership or donations.

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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Section 1: Introduction	6
Section 2: Internet Use in Wales	8
Section 3: Digital Inclusion in Wales	13
Section 4: Public Services Online	25
Section 5: Conclusion	35
ANNEX	39

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report looks at digital exclusion and public services in Wales. Its key findings are:

- Almost a third of people in Wales do not have an internet connection in their home. The same groups of people who experience digital exclusion experience other forms of disadvantage.
- People do not access the internet because of lack of awareness, knowledge and confidence, and because of lack of access to equipment and cost. When deciding to go online, financial reasons are significantly less important than social, family and employment-related reasons.
- The learning experience is very important to people's participation in ICT training.
- There are considerable efforts to increase public access to the internet but issues remain about access and usage that need to be addressed.
- Public services face a digital conundrum: a small proportion of people currently use public services online and, with a few notable exceptions, most public services are currently not available online. Fewer people in Wales than the UK are online, and a smaller proportion of people who are online visit government websites.
- Delivery of public services online is expected to be the default method in future. A major change, the handling of benefits, is anticipated in 2013. Action will be needed to ensure claimants in Wales are not disadvantaged irrespective of the digital shift of Welsh public services.
- The user-friendliness of the services that are online currently is variable. People are concerned about the quality and reliability of services accessed online, and about cost and alternative provision.

Continued overleaf

The implications of a public sector digital switchover are potentially very significant. We suggest that:

- **Strong leadership is needed to drive the online delivery of public services in tandem with digital inclusion, ensuring there is impetus, joining-up within the Welsh Government and between public bodies, and above all, good quality services for Welsh citizens.**
 - **When Welsh public services do go online, the Welsh Government needs to make a commitment that public bodies will retain offline means of access.**
 - **Steps should be taken to increase further public access to the internet at a wide a range of locations, with access available on Saturdays and in the evenings. A benchmark of the number of computers per head in an area and the availability to the public could be adopted.**
 - **Investment in support and training to use computers and the internet should continue, building on best practice in adult education and learning.**
 - **Public services going online must demonstrate that they have made arrangements to ensure nobody is excluded by the switchover.**
 - **Online public services must be of the highest quality, both in terms of the online experience and in terms of responsiveness. A means of quality-assuring digital public services could be established to drive up standards.**
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1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that the internet has transformed society: from the way we do business, and even the way we conduct friendships, it has brought major changes. Being online offers numerous benefits such as being able to buy goods and services more cheaply and quickly than before, providing access to a wealth of information and offering people new ways to stay in contact with their family and friends¹. Despite this, in 2010 there were still almost 10 million people in the UK who have never been online². It is estimated that just under a third of people living in Wales do not have access to the internet at home³.

There is now considerable pressure to put more and more public services online, with it being proposed that online provision becomes the 'default' form of provision. Not only is online provision argued to be cheaper, but it also offers the citizen easier access to services and allows resources to be focused on those who need them most. With UK and EU targets of half of citizens accessing public services online by 2015, there could be a radical change in how services are delivered.

The likely shift to online provision raises a significant challenge of how the needs of those who are currently offline might be met. This is all the more pressing because the individuals and households who do not currently use the internet are generally those who are already the most disadvantaged in society. As such they are likely to be more dependent than other groups of people on the very services that they could well be excluded from through a wholesale move to online delivery.

The Welsh Government has a dual commitment: on the one hand, it is firmly committed to digital inclusion through increasing take-up of broadband, and education in ICT skills; on the other hand, it is committed to 'digital by default' provision of public services. Work to fulfil both commitments is already underway. However it remains to be seen whether both can be achieved at the same time as meeting the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society.

This report explores these issues by considering the provision of public services online and the experiences and attitudes of a small sample of the general public in Caerphilly County Borough. In the south of the county there is relative prosperity, with Caerphilly's

¹ Manifesto for a Networked Nation. Available from http://raceonline2012.org/sites/default/files/resources/manifesto_for_a_networked_nation_-_race_online_2012.pdf

² Op cit.

³ Richards, S. (2009) Logged In or Locked Out: consumer access to the internet in Wales, Cardiff: Consumer Focus Wales

geographical proximity to Cardiff enabling ready access to jobs there, whereas the north of the county experiences high unemployment and low economic activity rates, low educational attainment and poor health, following the demise of its traditional industries.

The research for this project was undertaken through a mixture of desk-based work coupled with interviews with key stakeholders (listed at Annex 1) and interviews with 45 people living in the county. These people fell into three distinct groups:

- (1) those who did not use the internet or a computer,
- (2) people of working age who were learning how to use a computer, and
- (3) older people who were learning to use a computer – people who are sometimes called ‘silver surfers’.

A profile of the groups of people is provided at Annex 2. Interviews took place in the White Rose Centre in New Tredegar, in Caerphilly Library and in public locations in Caerphilly town centre. Some interviewees were participating in IT classes taking place in these locations, other interviewees were approached at these locations using screening questions to ensure they were in one of the three groups we were seeking to interview.

The rest of this report sets out the findings from this research.

2. INTERNET USE IN WALES

Over the past decade or so, the number of people using the internet has risen dramatically. Despite this, internet use is still far from universal and those who do not use it are unable to access the huge and ever increasing range of services that are offered online.

2.1. Internet Use in Wales

The proportion of households who access the internet via broadband has increased dramatically in recent years. The Welsh Government reported, using statistics from the Living in Wales survey (now the National Survey for Wales), that broadband take-up at home rose from 15% of households in 2004⁴ to 68% in 2010⁵. Consumer Focus Wales has reported that personal access to the internet has also increased, with 69% of people having access to the internet in 2009, up from 47% in 2006⁶. The ONS has also published statistics for the first quarter of 2011 showing over 80% of people in Wales have now used the internet⁷, even if they may not have access to it at home.

Take-up of the internet broadly parallels other socio-economic inequalities. It is strongly related to income: the higher an individual's income, the more likely he or she is to have used the internet. A survey by ONS in 2006 found that 93 per cent of adults with an income of £36,400 or more had used the internet in the three months prior to interview, more than twice the proportion (43 per cent) of those earning £10,400 or less⁸.

Specific research on children and young people has also found that not having access to the internet at home is strongly related to social class⁹. While 97 per cent of children from social class AB have internet access at home, only 69 per cent of children from social class E have internet access at home. Other disadvantaged groups include those whose main language is not English and children in lone parent households, who are also less likely to have internet access than others.¹⁰

⁴ Welsh Assembly Government (2009) Memorandum submitted to the Welsh Affairs Select Committee Inquiry into Digital Inclusion in Wales, Available at;

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmwelaf/memo/diw/ucdiw802.htm>

⁵ Welsh Assembly Government (2010) 2009-10 Pilot for the National Survey for Wales: Headline results. Statistical Bulletin SDR 211/2010. Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/statistics/2010/101125sdr2112010en.pdf>

⁶ Richards, S. (2009) *Logged In or Locked Out: consumer access to the internet in Wales*, Cardiff: Consumer Focus Wales.

Available at: http://www.consumerfocus.org.uk/assets/4/files/2009/11/404_20091120112419_e_@@_engreport.pdf

⁷ ONS quarterly datasets on internet access. Available from

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=5672>

⁸ ONS (2006) *Internet Access 2006: Households and Individuals*. Available at: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/inta0806.pdf>

⁹ BECTA. (2008). *Harnessing Technology Review 2008: The role of technology and its impact on education*. Coventry: BECTA.

¹⁰ Peters, M., Seeds, K., Goldstein, A., & Coleman, N. (2007). *Parental Involvement in Children's Education, London, DCSF*. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.

There is also evidence to suggest that disabled people use the internet less than non-disabled people. Ofcom's annual consumer experience reports¹¹ found that in 2008 only 42%, 32% and 36% respectively of people with visual, hearing and mobility impairments had broadband access at home, as opposed to around 60% of the general population, echoing earlier findings¹².

Adults aged under 70 who had a degree or equivalent qualification were most likely to have the internet in their home, at 93 per cent in 2008. Individuals who have no formal qualifications are least likely to have an internet connection in their home, at 56 per cent¹³.

Older people are the age group least likely to use the internet. In 2011, 57% of adults aged 65 plus stated they had never used it compared with a negligible number of 16–24 year olds and just 3% of 25-44 year olds¹⁴.

The exception to the association between internet use and disadvantage is ethnicity. Overall, people from ethnic minority groups, whilst disadvantaged in other areas of society, are 'at the forefront of digital device take-up and use', including use of the internet¹⁵. Nonetheless there are variations between different ethnic groups, and by age within ethnic minority groups.

2.2. Geographical Variations

Within Wales there is considerable geographical variation in broadband take-up. Table 1 shows how the numbers of people connected to the internet at home have risen substantially over the last 10 years throughout Wales, but that the rate of growth has been varied.

Table 1 Responses to the question 'are you connected to the internet at home?'

Percentage of Households responding 'yes'	2002	2003	2004	2005**	2006	2009
North Wales	28	38	42	51	43	66
Mid West Wales	42	44	41	34	49	63
South West Wales	34	33	42	39	48	67
Cardiff & South East (excluding valleys)	41	38	41	48	53	76

¹¹ Ofcom (2008) *The Consumer Experience 2008 Research Report*. Available at:

<http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/tce/ce08/research.pdf>

¹² Pilling, D., Barrett, P., and Floyd, M. (2004) *Does the Internet Open Up Opportunities for Disabled People?* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/does-internet-open-opportunities-disabled-people>

¹³ ONS (2008) *Internet Access 2008: Households and Individuals*, Available at: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/iahi0808.pdf>

¹⁴ ONS data tables from quarter 1 2011, available from <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=5672>

¹⁵ Ofcom (2008) op. cit.

Valleys	27	34	37	26	40	60
ALL WALES	35	37	41	41	47	69

Source: Welsh Consumer Council / Consumer Focus Wales¹⁶

** 2005 data should be treated with caution because of concerns about reliability.

Take-up is lowest in the South Wales Valleys at 60% of households, and highest in Cardiff and the rest of South East Wales at 76%.

2.3. Access to the internet outside the home

Most survey evidence focuses on internet access from home. However a growing proportion of people access the internet elsewhere, either using mobile technology or using computers located outside the home. Consumer Focus Wales estimated that 37% of people had used the internet outside of the home, in places such as libraries or places of study, in 2009¹⁷. There are 330 libraries in Wales open over 10 hours a week providing more than 2,600 computers for public use¹⁸. In addition to this, there are a number of internet cafes and premises with free wi fi located throughout Wales.

Ofcom's survey finds that 7% of households use only mobile broadband, and a further 9% use both mobile and fixed broadband. This is similar to the proportion using mobile broadband found by Consumer Focus Wales. The latter found that younger people were far more likely to use both computers outside the home and mobile broadband than older people.

2.4. The cost of being offline

There are numerous penalties to being offline.

Financial penalties

There is evidence that being on a low income can itself incur higher costs, or a 'poverty premium', as those on low incomes are less likely to be able to secure discounts by paying by direct debit, for example, or by buying in bulk.¹⁹ Being offline incurs an added penalty. The 'Manifesto for a Networked Nation' estimates the average consumer savings from using the internet are around £560 a year overall,²⁰ whilst research by SQW puts the average benefit of being online even higher, at £759 a year²¹. In the

¹⁶ Welsh Consumer Council, 2004, 2007, Richards, S. (2009) *Op. cit.*

¹⁷ Richards, S. (2009) *Op. Cit.*

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Winckler, V. (2009) Paying the price of being poor: the poverty premium in Wales. Bevan Foundation, available from www.bevanfoundation.org/resources/NIF+final+draft+5.pdf

²⁰ Manifesto for a Networked Nation, *op. cit* p.32

²¹ SQW Consulting (2008), Broadband in the Home: An Analysis of the Financial Costs and Benefits. Available at: http://www.sqw.co.uk/file_download/138

energy market, Consumer Focus Wales estimate that a consumer who has never switched energy suppliers can save over £300 a year– a quarter of the typical annual energy bill - by switching to a dual fuel online tariff²². Similarly, using a price comparison site for car insurance is estimated to generate savings of £225²³. Access to websites such as e-bay and other online traders can mean goods can sometimes be bought at lower prices than on the high street.

However, the savings are not uniformly distributed between social groups. Households in the highest income decile gain benefits from being online of £1,775 per annum whilst the lowest income decile save only £279 per annum.²⁴ The difference is because many of the benefits are associated with goods and services that those in the lowest income decile are less likely to buy. When the savings are set against the costs of purchasing and running a PC, broadband connection, printer etc, the payback time for low income households is considerably longer than for high income households. Indeed, for some low income households, being offline may be a rational economic decision.

Employment

Having ICT skills appears to significantly improve the chances of finding a job. SQW found that 3 in 4 jobs required the use of computers²⁵, and the 'Manifesto for a Networked Nation' estimated that this figure was even higher, with over 90% of all new jobs requiring basic internet skills²⁶. In addition, many jobs are only advertised online or require applications to be made online.

Education

The internet offers access to numerous educational resources, from the BBC education websites to school or local authority resources to specialist websites. It is estimated that children who have access to the internet at home achieve a two grade improvement at GCSE²⁷.

Social

²² Consumer Focus Wales (2010), *Domestic Energy Report, 20th January*. Available at:

<http://www.consumerfocus.org.uk/assets/4/files/2010/01/Domestic-Energy-Report-200110.PDF>

²³ See <http://www.moneysupermarket.com/c/news/how-to-beat-soaring-car-insurance-costs/0009413/>

²⁴ SQW Consulting (2008) op. cit.

²⁵ ibid

²⁶ Manifesto for a Networked Nation (2010) op. cit.

²⁷ ibid

It is increasingly the case that people use the internet to communicate with friends and family: around half of all users of the internet say that the internet helps them to keep in contact with friends and family.²⁸

2.5. Conclusion

Use of the internet is growing rapidly in Wales as in the UK as a whole. Despite this about a third of the population does not have access to the internet, and as a result experiences significant financial penalties as well as other social and economic disadvantages. Given that the people who are most likely not to use the internet are those who are most likely to be disadvantaged in other ways, there is a considerable risk that the growth of digital provision of goods and service will entrench and reinforce social exclusion.

²⁸ *ibid*

3. DIGITAL INCLUSION IN WALES

The penalties of being offline are such that government bodies, the third sector and private sector are all seeking in various ways to encourage people to use the internet. This work has added urgency with the prospect of a significant increase in public services being delivered online, not least because those who are least likely to be online are those who are likely to be most dependent on public services. The challenge is therefore immense.

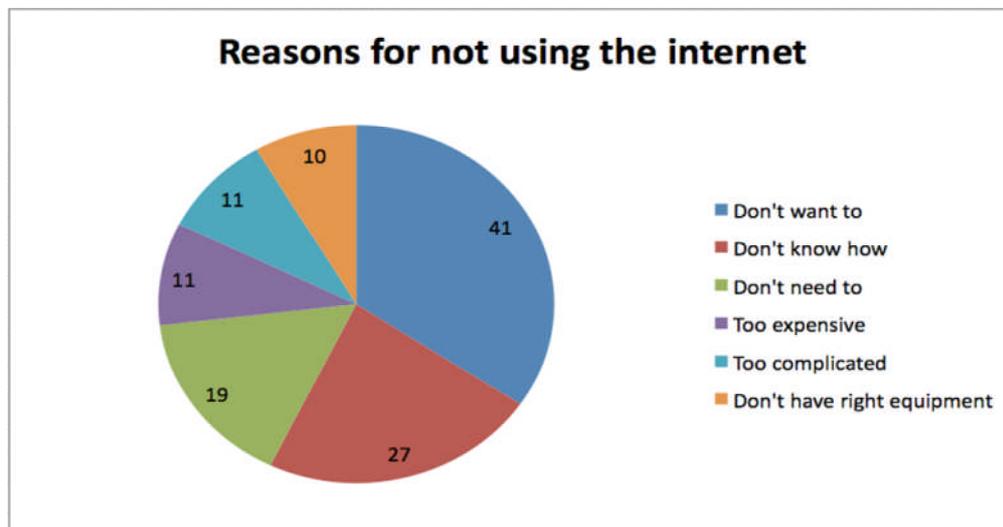
3.1 Reasons for not using the internet

People do not use the internet for a wide range of different reasons, which a number of surveys have explored over the years. Some of the reasons given for being offline may be regarded as 'voluntary', i.e. an individual says they believe they do not need the internet or are happy to use other means of getting information and communicating. Ofcom's survey suggests that about half of those without the internet give 'voluntary' reasons for not being online, although other surveys suggest a much higher proportion.

Involuntary reasons – where it is not an individual's choice to be without internet access – are more complex. 9% of all adults interviewed by Ofcom in 2009 did not access the internet for these types of reasons. Consumer Focus Wales's 2009 survey looked at the reasons for not using the internet in more depth (see Fig 1) and found that 11% of non-users cited affordability and a further 12% cited the lack of the correct equipment. An additional 38% of respondents cited 'knowledge-related' reasons for not using the internet.

There are thus two very different sets of challenges to encouraging greater use of the internet – those associated with increasing awareness of the benefits of going online and supporting people's use of it, and those associated with getting and paying for the necessary equipment. Government and other bodies have been addressing both these challenges.

Fig. 1 – Reasons for not using the internet (percentage of non-users)



Source: Richards, S. (2009) *Logged In or Locked Out*, page 23. *Consumer Focus Wales*

3.2 Tackling Digital Exclusion

The Welsh Government has been actively promoting digital inclusion for some years. It established Communities @One in 2006 to help people to use technology in the communities that needed it most. The project provided support to community groups and voluntary sector organisations, enabling them to engage with technologies in ways that were relevant to their lives. It included funding to help community and voluntary groups access the technologies that would benefit community members.

A recent evaluation of the scheme²⁹ was broadly positive about the scheme: more than 200 projects succeeded in disbursing more than £7 million, without moving away from the original emphasis on supporting small community projects. Many of the projects offered new opportunities in terms of access to ICT and giving skills and confidence to use it, mainly to individuals who otherwise had little exposure to such technology. The projects were diverse, ranging from drop-in facilities open to the community to innovative projects working with voluntary and community groups to apply ICT to their core activities. This was also intended to stimulate an interest on the part of individual members with digital technologies as a result.

²⁹ Welsh Assembly Government. (2008). *Evaluation of the Communities@One programme*. Cardiff: Welsh Assembly Government.

Communities 2.0 was announced early in 2009 and is following a similar approach to Communities @One, with nearly £20 million over six years being allocated with increased emphasis on social enterprise and the sustainability of projects.

In December 2010 the Welsh Government published its framework for delivering digital inclusion³⁰. The framework brings together a range of activities under the strategic leadership of the Welsh Government. In aiming to encourage people to go online, the Government puts the focus on creating an incentive for people to go online through bringing content such as data from local authority archives, museums and libraries online, thus creating access to family histories, journals and other sources of information of interest to people.

It also seeks to work with third sector partners through a series of initiatives to help priority groups (older people, people in social housing, economically inactive and unemployed people, and disabled people) in areas with low internet take up go online. Overall, the framework marks an important step in bringing together a range of activities related to digital inclusion and helps to move the issue up the policy agenda.

3.3 Initiatives in Caerphilly

At the time of undertaking this research, Caerphilly County Borough Council did not have a specific digital inclusion strategy, although one was being prepared. It has, however, implemented various initiatives to encourage internet use and IT literacy. The authority itself employs a full-time digital inclusion officer, has developed a network of computer clubs and classes operating in Caerphilly, and has established a digital network for businesses in the Upper Rhymney Valley. Old and unused IT equipment from council offices is distributed to community centres, clubs and schools in Communities First areas.

The authority is also working with other organisations in Caerphilly to increase use of the internet, some of which have emerged from the Communities@One or Communities 2.0 schemes, others have emerged from sources such as Workers Education Association courses, youth services providing informal tuition in youth centres, and libraries encouraging people to take their first click as part of the BBC campaign. A pilot project is currently looking at providing wireless access and mentoring across five housing estates aimed at improving uptake of broadband in the home. A new initiative, 'Get IT together' is being launched in autumn 2011.

Caerphilly's libraries are a key part of its digital inclusion efforts, with all libraries being equipped for public use of the internet. Staff are trained and encouraged to help people

³⁰ Welsh Assembly Government (2011), Delivering digital inclusion, available from <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dsjlg/publications/comm/101208deliveringdien.pdf>

learn how to go online through one-to-one sessions. The authority sees information resource centres such as the White Rose centre in New Tredegar as the way forward. Such centres not only consist of libraries but also offer a range of classes (including IT classes), advice centres and cafes to encourage people to use the facilities in a relaxed manner.

3.4 Public provision of internet access in Caerphilly

One of the ways in which digital inclusion is promoted is through the provision of access to the internet through computers made available to the public, and in particular through public libraries. In addition to libraries, computers are provided in community centres, youth clubs and schools. There is also a range of classes and workshops covering everything from basic IT skills and use of the internet to digital photography and database development. There are also one-off workshops that are held by organisations such as GEECS (<http://geecs.tumblr.com/about>) that aim to improve digital storytelling.

We conducted a telephone survey of libraries in Caerphilly to find out their opening hours, number of computers available, views about demand for public access internet, whether there were any technical issues and whether they had special software for use by disabled people. We did not investigate provision outside libraries.

There are 19 libraries in Caerphilly offering a total of 198 computers with internet access. The numbers available per library ranged from two or three in small libraries such as Pontlottyn and Machen, to 23 in Blackwood and 19 in Caerphilly, both larger with dedicated computer rooms. All computers at libraries have internet access, and have Microsoft Word, Excel and Powerpoint available plus a PDF reader. At least one computer in each library offers Publisher, JAWS and SUPERNOVA (for disabled people) and desktop and internet services in Welsh. Printing is available for 10p per sheet of black and white print. The authority's website now advises that users can save work onto USB memory sticks or floppy disks (both of which are sold in libraries), enabling files created during a computing session (e.g. a copy of a job application or confirmation that an online activity has been successfully completed) to be saved.

Arrangements to use public access computers depend on the level of demand. If a computer is available it can be accessed immediately, free of charge. Computers can also be booked in advance if desired. Use is limited to 30 minute slots initially, but can be extended (subject to availability) to a maximum of two hours. Library staff told us that at busy times such as Saturdays, the computers are often fully booked.

Support for IT users was available in all libraries on an ad-hoc basis. All staff, when available, can provide one to one informal support. Libraries are also part of the BBC's "first click" campaign, which is aiming to get people online for the first time. Under this

campaign, people are being encouraged to ask library staff to show them how to go online. In the larger libraries, regular classes for a range of abilities take place, as well as occasional sessions taking place on subjects such as digital photography.

However, there are some issues that affect the availability of this free-to-use internet access. The first is the opening times of libraries: only nine of the 19 libraries are open “full-time” (i.e. six or more days a week). Only seven libraries are open on Saturdays and most are closed by 6 pm if not earlier, (although a few have one ‘late night’ e.g. to 7 or 7.30pm). The libraries with the longer opening hours tend to be located in larger settlements, with smaller libraries, with part-time opening, being in smaller communities. In addition, lack of public transport in Caerphilly can make some libraries inaccessible for people without their own transport. The lack of Saturday opening can also be a problem for people who cannot visit a library during the week, e.g. because they are working. Table 2 shows the location, opening hours and number of computers available for each of the libraries in Caerphilly.

Table 2 Opening hours and locations of libraries in Caerphilly

Library	Opening Hours	Number of computers for public use
Aberbargoed Library	PT	4
Abercarn Library*	PT	2
Abertridwr Library	FT SAT (morning only)	10
Bargoed Library	FT SAT	17
Bedwas Library	PT SAT (morning only)	5
Blackwood Library	FT SAT	23
Caerphilly Library	FT SAT	19
Deri Library	PT	8
Llanbradach Library	PT	8
Machen Library	PT SAT (morning only)	3
Nelson Library	PT SAT (morning only)	13
New Tredegar Library	FT	16
Newbridge Library	PT	10
Oakdale Library	PT	8
Pengam Library	PT	10
Pontlottyn Library	PT	2
Rhymney Library	FT	16
Risca Library	FT SAT	12
Ystrad Mynach Library	FT SAT (morning only)	12

Key: FT = Full time (6 or more days a week).

PT = Part time (5 days a week or fewer).

SAT = Open on Saturday.

* Closed for refurbishment at the time of research

The second issue is that of the time limit on the duration of use. The limit of 30 minutes during busy periods is likely to restrict users’ ability to undertake time-consuming activities (for example, researching a subject or completing an application process) and

it is not always possible for partially-completed transactions to be saved. The high level of demand also means that casual users may be unable to access a computer at short notice.

The third issue is that of online activity. Caerphilly County Borough Council restricts the websites that can be visited, for example we were advised that users cannot access Facebook and some webmail sites. The restriction on webmail access in particular may create difficulties if users only have webmail email accounts – highly likely if they do not have a home computer. Users of library computers are therefore unable to use the plethora of internet services that require an email address, from making online purchases, registering to receive information by email, or receiving notifications e.g. of a job interview. An IT professional commented that Caerphilly County Borough Council had some of the greatest restrictions on websites that could be accessed through public library computers.

Fourth, there are potential issues of privacy, as computer screens may be seen by others which poses a risk for those wishing to conduct financial transactions online and may also be of concern to anyone wishing to research personal information (such as health). There are also usual privacy and security concerns where there are multiple users.

Last, public access computers in Caerphilly have, until recently, been replaced on a three year rolling basis, which has meant that all computers in libraries are reasonably new. However, replacement has been cut back to a five year rolling basis due to lack of finance, which could have implications for access in future as machines become relatively old. Most of the library staff interviewed told us that the facilities operated without problems, although there were inevitably occasional technical problems that made computers temporarily unavailable.

3.5 Citizen Experiences of internet use

Successive surveys show that the number of non-users of the internet is decreasing, suggesting that individuals and households change their views. Indeed a recent Ofcom survey³¹ suggested that 10% of all adults in Wales intended to get the internet in the next year. An issue of significance to digital inclusion is therefore why people decided to go on line, as well as why some people continue to be non-users.

³¹ Ofcom (2010) Communications Market Report 2010. Available at: http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/753567/CMR_Wales_2010.pdf

We sought to answer these questions by interviewing 30 people who were learning to use the internet. We interviewed attendees at formal ICT classes (a Learn Direct course) as well as at informal groups (a ‘come surf with me’ group aimed at older people). Some of those we interviewed had a home computer although not all the interviewees used it, although most used public access computers. Interviews were semi-structured and took place at or following the class or group. We conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with people attending these classes.

In addition, we interviewed 15 people who were not current users of the internet, identifying them in a variety of locations such as libraries and cafes. These interviews were also semi-structured and took about 20 minutes.

Motives for learning

We asked new learners of the internet why they wanted to learn. People gave a wide range of reasons (they could give as many as they wished) with the results summarised in table 3.

Table 3 Motivations for wanting to learn

Reason	Total
Enjoying social side of learning	15
Wanting to help children or grandchildren	10
Curiosity	8
Was given computer by family	6
Improve employment prospects	6
Needing to get out of the house/take up a new hobby	5

The table shows that the most commonly given reason for wanting to learn was the social side of learning, in other words the motivation was not associated with the benefits of going online at all.

“We all have a really good laugh here, and go to the cafe afterwards”

[Amy, New Learner]

The next most frequent reason was wanting to help children or grandchildren – again, not a motivation directly associated with the benefits of going online. The family context was a common theme in motivations to learn, with many older learners being given an old laptop or PC by a family member which sparked an interest in wanting to learn. Others were motivated by wanting to help their children with homework.

"I had a laptop given to me by my daughter, so I thought I'd learn how to use it"

[John, Silver Surfer]

"My daughter has a PC, but I didn't understand how to use it and wanted to learn"

[Anne, New learner]

"I wanted to learn as so I can help my son with his schoolwork"

[Kelly, New Learner]

Internet-associated reasons, such as curiosity or improving employment prospects, were less significant overall, although they were much more important amongst younger learners. All six younger people interviewed gave improving skills and employability as a reason for learning:

"You have to be able to use computers these days to get a job"

[Sarah, New Learner]

For older people, curiosity or the desire to take up a new hobby were more important than the practical element of using computers.

"I just came to see what it was all about really, I'm retired so like things to fill my time"

[Keith, Silver Surfer]

Although the numbers of respondents are small, there are valuable messages about digital inclusion here. In particular, socialising seems to be crucial in attracting and retaining IT learners. Significantly the financial benefits of going online e.g. savings on goods and services, or greater speed of certain transactions were not cited by any interviewees.

Why people don't learn

We attempted to explore people's reasons for not using the internet in more depth. We found that many (10 out of the 15) of those who didn't use the internet had in fact experienced ICT in some capacity in the past, but a bad experience had put them off developing an interest in the internet.

"When I worked I was sent on a computer course, I think it was around 1990, but I broke one of the computers and felt really bad. My husband sorts all that stuff out now"

[Alison, Retired, non user of internet]

"I had one [a computer] years ago, but it was very slow, kept breaking and I didn't know what to do. I just gave up in the end"

[Brian, Non-user of internet]

Table 4 summarises the reasons given for not using the internet (some people gave more than one reason).

Table 4 Reasons why people didn't want to use the internet

Reason	Number
Complex/too difficult	7
Never needed to be able to use it	3
Don't see the appeal of it	3
Cost/Perceived cost	2
Perceived dangers of internet use	2
Don't think it's for people like me	2
Worried about breaking things	1
Don't know	1

The main reason given was the perceived complexity and difficulty in using computers, mentioned by 7 out of 15 people. The other reasons were considerably less important and each was mentioned by just two or three people. For example perceived dangers were mentioned by two people:

"I keep hearing about these bad things that happen – you know money getting stolen and things like that"

[Mary, Non-user of internet]

Another factor was people simply not understanding the appeal of the internet or believing it was not necessary for them:

"My wife is on Facebook all the time, it's a waste if you ask me - I've got better things to do. I prefer to have a social life"

[Steven, Non-user of internet]

"I'm lucky enough to have a stable job, so I don't need to have a computer. But I suppose I'd have to retrain if the worst happened"

[Andrew, Non-user of internet]

These responses are from a very small number of people, but are not inconsistent with the findings of larger surveys. Taken together, they suggest that fear and lack of awareness are key 'voluntary' factors in people's reluctance to use the internet. This is a valuable pointer to those seeking to address digital exclusion.

Experiences of learning

Whilst initial motivations for learning are important, they are only the first step. It is equally important that learning experiences are positive so that motivation to learn is maintained. In our research both learners and non-learners were asked about their experiences of learning (or being supported in ICT).

We found that a good learning experience was crucial to maintaining enthusiasm. Learners and non-learners felt that learning was best in a relaxed atmosphere, where there was a good atmosphere, and where people found the activities relevant to them.

"I thought this class would be a bit like school, but it isn't. I'm doing stuff I want to do at home now!"

[Huw, New Learner]

"I love it. I'm like a kid with a new toy!"

[Brian, New Learner]

The range of activities is also important in keeping people interested. At one of the classes, we observed learners looking online at a range of websites from concert tickets and shopping to sports news. The tutor was around to help people, but people were encouraged to pursue their own interests in addition to the more 'formal' aspects of the class such as learning word.

Learners at these classes said they were now confident in using their own computers at home, and those who were new to ICT saw their confidence grow, and began to see the benefits of using the internet.

"I now use my computer at home, do my shopping and buy concert tickets online. I still struggle when it goes wrong mind, but they help me with that here"

[Jane, New Learner]

"I can't wait to get a computer now, I only came to see what it was all about"

[Mike, Silver Surfer]

Some people felt that a class was not for them, but that as a result of curiosity or encouragement from friends, they had asked a librarian for an informal learning session.

Every person we interviewed who had started learning in this way had a positive experience.

As well as good experiences, we also found bad experiences of learning. One of the most common forms of bad experience was classes being moved or cancelled, prompting some participants to change courses:

“I first went to classes in Rhymney, but they kept getting cancelled. At least I know this one is on every week”

[Ken, Silver Surfer]

“I started going last year, but the tutor was ill so it was cancelled. It’s like I have to start again now”

[John, Silver Surfer]

Additionally some learners had previously had bad experiences with the content of the classes:

“I went to a class in Bargoed, but it was way over my head. I didn’t understand it, and it was too formal - like school”

[Kelly, New learner]

In the case of the people quoted above, a bad experience had not deterred them from learning. However, we also identified individuals where previous bad experiences *had* put them off further learning and as a result they did not now use the internet:

“I went to a class once, but it was just full of jargon – I didn’t understand it at all”

[Peter, Non-user]

“The Job Centre sent me on a course once. But none of us wanted to be there, it was just about keeping the figures down and ticking boxes”

[Mark, Non-user of the internet]

A final point worth noting is that of access which was raised by several non-users of the internet:

“I went to a class last year, but it finished quite late and there were no buses home”

[Cheryl, Non-user of the internet]

3.6 Conclusions

Caerphilly County Borough Council, with its partners, is making considerable efforts to encourage use of the internet and the acquisition of ICT skills through a variety of means. Nearly 200 free-to-use computers with internet access are available through its network of public libraries. However, we identified issues associated with the availability of computers, restrictions on the duration of use and the websites that could be visited that may limit users making full use of the internet, and potential lack of privacy. These limitations could become more marked as constraints on public spending could affect opening times, staffing and computer hardware.

We found that the social experience of learning was very important, especially for older people, whilst the financial benefits of using the internet were not significant. The main reason people did not want to use the internet was the perceived difficulty. The overall experience of learning was extremely important to people becoming and remaining engaged.

4 PUBLIC SERVICES ONLINE

Pressure on public expenditure is increasing interest in online methods of service delivery, not least as a means of containing or cutting costs. The economic benefits of getting people online have been estimated in excess of £22 billion for the UK³².

The 'Manifesto for a Networked Nation' recommends introducing the expectation that people of working age should use key services online, with the UK Government responding that public services should be 'digital by default'.³³ Already some key services are delivered online, such as self-assessment taxation by HMRC and driving licensing and vehicle road tax by DVLA. Further shifts to online are in prospect: the Department for Work and Pensions intends that claims for Universal Credit, to be introduced from 2013, will normally be made online and that most subsequent contact with claimants will also be online³⁴, whilst Manifesto for a Networked Nation recommends that local authorities should expect all school admissions and free school meals applications to be submitted online by 2011.³⁵

Management consultants Deloitte recommend that public bodies should do a great deal more. They suggest that public bodies should put 'the overwhelming majority of transactions' online, significantly reducing face-to-face or telephone contact with citizens.³⁶

In Wales, there is a great deal of work being undertaken on improving the efficiency of and innovation in public services via, amongst other initiatives, the Efficiency and Innovation Board (EIB).³⁷ The EIB includes work on ICT, although its focus to date has been primarily on improving *internal* systems, e.g. through use of common systems and platforms such as broadband infrastructure, software and data centres.³⁸ The EIB's work on 'transforming the business' and 'new models of service delivery' to date

³² Manifesto for a Networked Nation (2010) op. cit.

³³ Francis Maude (2010) 'Digital by Default Proposed for Government Services', Cabinet Office Statement, 23rd November. Available at: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/digital-default-proposed-government-services>

³⁴ Department for Work and Pensions (2010) Universal Credit – Welfare that Works, CM 7957, p33

³⁵ Manifesto for a Networked Nation, op. cit. p48

³⁶ Deloitte (2011) Choosing fewer channels - Public service channel options in an age of austerity. Available at: http://www.deloitte.com/assets/Dcom-UnitedKingdom/Local%20Assets/Documents/Industries/GPS/UK_GPS_Choosingfewchannels.pdf

³⁷ Welsh Government (2011) Meeting the Challenge of Change: Our Shared Approach to Public Service Efficiency and Innovation. Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dpsp/publications/110217eishareden.pdf>

³⁸ Welsh Government (2011) Meeting the Challenge of Change - Progress on the Efficiency and Innovation Agenda. Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dpsp/publications/110207eibprogressen.pdf>

similarly appears to focus on issues of collaboration between organizations, infrastructure and capacity.

Instead, the real drive to put public services online appears to part of the 'Delivering a Digital Wales'³⁹ economic development strategy. The delivery plan⁴⁰ states that the position of 'digital by default' will apply to many services, with the most relevant services to be made available online being identified by 2012. Consideration will be given to whether the UK and EU target of 50% of citizens using digital public services by 2015 is appropriate and achievable for Wales, and measures to increase the use made of digital public services will also be developed. Although it is far from clear how the target would be measured, if it was achieved it could bring a radical change in how people in Wales access a wide range of public services.

The Digital Wales Delivery Plan fully acknowledges the importance of 'protecting the rights of those that remain digitally excluded'.⁴¹ It also says that close collaboration with the Welsh Government's digital exclusion actions will be essential.

4.1 Accessing Public Services on the internet

Despite the provision of some public services online, usage lags way behind other activities undertaken using the internet. Ofcom research shows that across the UK, 26% of adults claimed to have used the internet to visit a government or local council website in 2010.⁴² This compares with 89% of users who use it for email, and 70% who use it to purchase goods or services online. There is clearly some way to go before digital is the default means of engaging with public services.

The proportion of adults using the internet to visit government websites in Wales is even lower than the UK as a whole, at fewer than one in five people (18%). Within Wales, people in rural areas (22%) were slightly more likely to visit these sites than those in urban areas (17%). Use of government sites was most popular in North and Mid Wales, where over a third (34%) of people claimed to have used them.

It is worth bearing in mind that these figures relate to the number who have visited a government website not undertaken a transaction on it – we would expect that the proportion of adults who have actually used a public service online is almost certainly even lower still.

³⁹ Welsh Government (2010) Delivering a Digital Wales. Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/det/publications/101208digitalwalesen.pdf>

⁴⁰ Welsh Government (2011) Digital Wales: Delivery Plan. Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/det/publications/110427deliveryplan.pdf>

⁴¹ Welsh Government (2010) Delivering a Digital Wales. Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/det/publications/101208digitalwalesen.pdf> P. 30

⁴² Ofcom (2010) op. cit.

4.2 Examples of Services

Public services in Caerphilly are provided by a wide range of different organisations, including UK bodies such as DVLA and the Department for Work and Pensions, the local health board and police service, colleges and universities and of course the local authority itself. These organisations vary considerably in the extent to which they provide services online.

Caerphilly County Borough Council has a pragmatic approach to online service delivery: whilst being able to appreciate the benefits of online services, it also appreciates that not everybody has the knowledge, means or willingness to use them. It intends to maintain its contact centres and front desk services to provide options for people who wish to contact the authority in this manner. Nonetheless, it is also developing a community digital TV channel that replicates the services that are moving online. The initial pilot of this TV channel was well received and the authority is confident that it will provide an alternative for those who do not have broadband access at home.

We selected five different services delivered by the public sector to people in Caerphilly, chosen to represent a range of types of interactions a citizen may have with public services, such as providing information, making a payment, making a claim, arranging a service and making a complaint. The five services chosen were:

- (1) Making a new claim for housing benefit
- (2) Reporting anti-social behaviour or harassment
- (3) Paying vehicle road tax
- (4) Booking an appointment with a GP, and
- (5) Making a complaint about a missed refuse collection.

Websites were accessed during the week of January 10th 2011, using a broadband connection and using the 'Firefox' web browser. When accessing them we assessed how long pages took to load, how 'cluttered' the pages were (an issue for those with slow connections as 'clutter' wastes bandwidth), use of jargon, and how many 'clicks' it took to find information. A follow-up check of the websites was undertaken on 4th August 2011 using Safari. The results are shown in Table 5.

We acknowledge this review of services has limitations. The assessments are the views of the researcher rather than quantitative measures of the response. We did not take into account the accessibility of the services to disabled people, nor did we look at the availability of online services in Welsh. Also, we were unable to test the responsiveness of online services. Nevertheless, what we did undertake is a useful indicator of the services available.

Table 5 – Public Services Online

Service	Availability Online	Ease of access	Ease of use
<p>New Housing Benefit Claim (Caerphilly CBC)</p>	<p>Only the provision of information and an application form is online. The transaction is done offline.</p>	<p>Not listed on home page. Accessed via click on housing page, then another click to housing and council tax benefit page. This link wasn't on the main navigation tab but as a 'see also' link. Then click for a new claim.</p> <p>Can also be accessed by a 'apply for it' button on the home page, which goes to a list of services which can be applied for online. Housing benefit is listed under 'C' for 'Council and housing tax benefit', not 'H'.</p>	<p>PDF files have to be downloaded (487kb), printed, completed by hand and posted with supporting documents.</p> <p>Telephone number and address given for enquiries.</p>
<p>Reporting anti-social behaviour in council housing (Caerphilly CBC)</p>	<p>Yes.</p>	<p>Caerphilly CBC - Accessed by a 'report it' button on the home page, which goes to a list of matters which can be reported online.</p> <p>Gwent Police does not include direct reporting. The home page has a postcode search facility which identifies the relevant neighbourhood policing team and advises calling 101 to report a crime. A different page gives a list of who to contact to report different types of anti-social behaviour - accessed from the home page via an 'information point', then via 'e-leaflets', then via 'anti-social behaviour', then 'who you should call for help'. The contact details state just 'local authority' without giving a name or number.</p>	<p>Online form to chose type of anti-social behaviour and severity. Space for text.</p> <p>Categories of behaviour used e.g. 'intimidation' may not be easily understood. No instructions on how the form should be completed.</p> <p>No other means of contact provided. Link to additional information goes to a news page.</p>
<p>http://www.caerphilly.gov.uk/site.aspx?s=rGe1VXTAhKth19n9GaybiA==</p> <p>https://eforms.caerphilly.gov.uk/AF3/an/default.aspx/RenderForm/?F.Name=GQBdtAq-s8O&s=wIIUUrWB5y6INGJDx%20YczVrwyzr%20f9Ap28tAWsVkw9Ma0XYF5a7F2P%20XsY%20hNTe&pg=application and http://www.gwent.police.uk/info_point/eleaflets/antisocial_behaviour/antisocial_behaviour.htm</p>			

Paying road tax	Yes	Access via Direct Gov.	Online application, simple stages. Could not be accessed fully without a live transaction.
http://www.taxdisc.direct.gov.uk/EvlPortalApp/			
Booking appointment with GP	Appointment booking not available. Contact details are online but do not necessarily include es not always allow online contact.	<p>Details of different GP practices in the area are on Aneurin Bevan Health Board's website. A link from the home page goes to a list of GP practices (organised by town), a telephone number and a link to more information about the practice e.g. opening times.</p> <p>Caerphilly CBC home page has a link to 'health' which has two sentences of information. There is a quick link to Aneurin Bevan Health Board home page, as above.</p> <p>The NHS Wales website (Health in Wales) has a directory page, which features a GP finder when a postcode is typed in. The page is accessed via the home page, where 'our services' lists the directory. The GP finder is not highlighted.</p>	n/a
http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/866/directory/gps/ OR http://www.wales.nhs.uk/ourservices/directory http://www.caerphilly.gov.uk/site.aspx?s=3IFU4iY3w3f1fYCvoj9W6EE3rdBN6bs9PeHGWfl+9AEkEPyK4oRLyQ==			

Complaint about a missed household refuse collection	Yes	<p>Quick 'waste and recycling' link from home page to waste page. Long list of specific waste services includes 'bin collections', where there is the ability to report a missed collection.</p> <p>Alternative access via the 'report it' button on the home page, listed under 'missed refuse/recycling collection'.</p>	<p>Simple form to complete online with address where the collection has been missed and a checklist of services omitted. Available via 'report it' button but on date of retest the page was not available via the 'waste and recycling' quick link.</p> <p>Varied use of the terms 'waste', 'refuse' and 'bins' could be confusing.</p> <p>No instructions or alternative contact details on online form page. An alternative phone number is given on the waste page.</p>
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<http://www.caerphilly.gov.uk/site.aspx?s=ZlYlNmF1JYMpiluezYGXDQ==> OR
<https://eforms.caerphilly.gov.uk/AF3/an/default.aspx/RenderForm/?F.Name=CVnbiHfbw6H&s=wIIUerWB5y6INGJ Dx%20YczVrwyzr%20f9Ap28tAWsVkw9Ma0XYF5a7F2P%20XsY%20hNTE&pg=application>

This brief analysis suggests that the availability of public services online in Caerphilly is very variable. Whilst renewing road tax is now a well-established UK service, it is clear that provision of others online has not even begun e.g. there is no provision of GP services online at present (although there are plans to do so) - some GPs do not even have a website with providing basic information. Similarly it is not possible to report anti-social behaviour to Gwent police online. A considerable number of local authority services provided by Caerphilly County Borough Council are available online under their report it, request it, apply for it or pay for it buttons. Even so, not all transactions can be fully completed online (e.g. making a new housing benefit claim), albeit sometimes for legal or technical reasons.

Where services are available online, we found accessing them was sometimes but not always straightforward. Sometimes the relevant pages were difficult to locate, even for the researchers who are experienced internet users, not least because they were located in sections of a website that an ordinary member of the public would be unlikely to search (e.g. information about anti-social behaviour in an 'e-leaflets' section, or a GP finder in located in 'Directory', or Housing Benefit indexed under 'C'). Other services took multiple clicks to reach or used professional rather than lay terms (e.g. refuse vs waste vs bins). It is hard to imagine how an inexperienced, under-confident user might have located these services let alone used them.

It seemed that those services that were available online made considerable attempts to be simple to use. However we noted that several did not give instructions on what to do, or offer phone or email contacts as an alternative or fall-back method if online access failed or to deal with queries. Whilst experienced internet users may be able to complete online forms without explanation and navigate to different contact pages to find phone numbers and email addresses in the event of a problem, the less experienced and confident would most probably struggle. We also noted that some services did not explain the process following submission of an online form (although it may be that this information was provided after submission). Similarly, when a link to an online form was broken there was no information about what alternatives might be available.

4.3 Attitudes towards online public services

We discussed the possible moves towards delivery of increasing numbers of public services online in interviews, using as examples the potential to go online to apply for free school meals, make an appointment with a GP online, and pay council tax. People were asked a series of questions to gather their overall opinion of the move online, how confident they would feel using online services, and – for those who didn't use the internet – whether such a move would encourage them to use ICT. We also asked their views of delivery of services via digital TV and mobile phone apps.

Opinions overall were mixed, with both positive and negative views expressed about the online public services. Nobody interviewed expressed unreserved support, and many qualified their positive comments with caveats about the need to ensure the quality of services remained the same, and alternatives were given for those who would be unable to use online services.

“It will probably be way better than being on hold all the time; I’m all for improving the service. But they do need to make sure people who can’t use computers can still use the service”

[David, Silver Surfer]

People also had varying levels of confidence about using public services online. The level of confidence was related to the level of experience of the internet - those who had been learning for some time (and were essentially going to the classes because they enjoyed the social side of learning) thought they would be able to manage, but warned that people less confident in ICT would find the process too much. They argued that alternatives need to be provided:

“I’d be able to do it myself, but some people can’t or won’t learn – it’s going to be too much for them”

[Peter, Silver Surfer]

“I think resistance will die down – I remember when the pension book was replaced and there was an uproar about that. But you’ll always need an alternative for when things break or for people who really can’t use things”

[Gareth, Silver Surfer]

Those who had started learning more recently, were a little more concerned, and felt that help and support would need to be available for them to be able to use services online.

“I could only do it if somebody was there to show me how to do it. I’m quite happy going on the internet here, but I don’t yet use it at home”

[Brian, New Learner]

Table 6 summarises the concerns expressed by people who were learning how to use the internet (more than one response was possible).

Table 6 Concerns over online service delivery expressed by people learning how to use the internet

Concerns over online service delivery (learners)	Number
Prefer to deal with a person	8
Scepticism over whether the systems will work properly	6
Person is not capable of using it themselves	6
Concerns over security of information	5
Concerns over impact on elderly, disabled people or people who can't use computers	5
Existing service is poor	3
There isn't enough public provision of ICT	3
Doesn't want council staff to lose jobs	1

The main concern was that people preferred to deal with a person. The GP appointments system was brought up by several people as an example where automated systems had caused a decline in service level:

“Have you tried calling the doctor? You stay on hold for ages and then can't get an appointment anyway. It will be 10 times worse if you have to do it online.”

[Brian, Silver Surfer]

Other examples were also given of concerns regarding online services:

“I tried using the online form to report rubbish on the council website. It took 3 days before I got a reply. I'm just going to call next time”

[Peter, Silver Surfer]

“These things are always good when they work, but what happens when the site stops working ?– as they always do”

[John, Silver Surfer]

Further concerns were expressed about the transfer of money or confidential information:

“I'd use the website for some things, but I just don't trust a website enough to give them my bank details”

[Mary, New Learner]

There were also concerns about access to broadband services. Several people mentioned that broadband speed was slow in the Upper Rhymney Valley. People also

wondered where people were going to access a computer if they didn't have one at home, particularly with concerns over the future opening hours of libraries. Public transport was also mentioned as an issue:

"The problem is I live in a rural area, and the buses are not good. I can get here because it is daytime, but when it snowed I was stuck in. I don't have a computer at home, so what am I supposed to do in the winter?"

[Terry, Silver Surfer]

Table 7 shows the concerns that were expressed by those who didn't use the internet (more than one concern was expressed by some). The main concerns were complexity, with people specifically stating they would need help to access services:

"I'll need somebody to show me how to use it, it's bad enough when you have to fill the forms in on paper"

[Peter, Non-user of the internet]

"It's all gibberish to me, I don't know how to use computers and probably never will"

[Alison, Non-user of the internet]

"Well I'm still learning. I don't use shopping websites as I don't yet trust them, and I don't want to get things wrong."

[Ray, New learner]

Table 7 Concerns over online public services – non-users

Concerns over online service delivery (non users)	Number
Couldn't cope – would need help in using new systems	5
They have to provide alternatives that involve dealing with a person	5
Cost of obtaining equipment	4
Worries about impact on service quality	3
Not liking the coercion implied	1

Others expressed concern over the cost of having to obtain equipment and the ongoing cost of a broadband connection. The costs of going online should not be underestimated - Table 8 demonstrates that the cost of going online could be at least nearly £1,700. Even if a computer was purchased online rather than via a pay-weekly arrangement, the cost over 18 months is at least a minimum of £1,000. As low-income

households gain less financially from going online than high-income households, because of the mix of goods and services they purchase, SQW concluded that for some people not going online is a rational economic decision.

The costs of owning and running a PC can be prohibitive for households on a low income:

“Who is going to pay for me to have a computer then?, I just can’t afford one”

[John , Non–user of internet]

Table 8 Typical Costs of going online

Item	Cost	Cost over length of contract
Laptop Computer (Acer Gold 15.6” (priced from Brighthouse)*)	£10.99 per week plus £1.65 insurance if home contents cover not in place	£1,142.96
BT broadband (includes evening calls and line rental)	£24 per month (18 month contract)	£432
Microsoft Office Home and student package (priced from PC World)	Microsoft Office Home £84.95	£84.95
HewlettPack Deskjet 1000 printer and set of printer cartridges (priced from PC World)	£19.99 £19.99	£39.98
	TOTAL	£1,699.89

*The same item is available online (from AcerDirect) for £520.94

Overall, the comments from both learners and non-users of the internet suggest that a significant proportion of people who do not currently use the internet would not be able to use online services without support and the ability to afford to access them. Learners and non-users alike expressed concerns over the impact on disabled people or older people, and expressed the view that alternatives that involve a personal contact (face to face or telephone) must remain.

Digital television and mobile phone applications are being explored as means of accessing Caerphilly County Borough Council Services. Table 9 shows there were mixed opinions about their potential use. One interviewee simply laughed at the idea of using access via digital television, saying “ I would never in a million years, have thought about that”. Many people, although having digital TV at home, had never used interactive services. Some even thought it would be more difficult using an interactive TV channel. There were, however some positive responses:

“Well I use Sky +, so I’d give it a go. But I think I’d need to be shown how to use it”

[John, Silver Surfer]

Views about mobile phone applications were largely negative. There were several concerns expressed about the suitability of mobile phone apps as many people felt the technology was simply not suitable for a detailed interaction or form-filling, with most simply explaining that it would just be easier to call. Several people said they would be unable to use mobile phone apps because they didn’t own a smartphone. One interviewee also pointed out that to use a smartphone, you have to be able to use the internet:

“You do realize that to use the latest phones you have to be connected, right?”

[John, Non-user of the internet]

Table 9 Attitudes to Digital TV and Mobile Phone applications

Opinions of DTV as an alternative	Number of Responses
Would not use it at all	18
Would probably try but has major concerns about suitability	14
Enthusiastic – would try it	13
Opinions of Mobile phone apps	Number of responses
Would not use it at all	30
Would probably try but has major concerns	12
Enthusiastic – would try it	3

Some respondents felt that some services were too important to be delivered online and the option of calling a phone number needed to remain for those occasions where a person needed to be contacted.

“If it is just about receiving information from the school, or telling me rubbish is cancelled, then a text message is fine. If I want to apply for something then I’d rather call someone and deal with a person”

[Mary, New Learner]

Another point made was that after having been exposed to the potential of the internet, some learners preferred to use it:

“I think I’d prefer to just use the internet – I’m now seeing what you can do with it, and that’s more than you can do with a phone or remote control”

[Peter, Silver Surfer]

4.4 Conclusion

This section has highlighted that use of the internet to access public services has a very considerable way to go before it is the ‘default’ means of delivery. Although some government services are relatively well-established online, only a minority of internet users visit government websites and only a small proportion of services are fully available via the internet. We found reluctance to access public services online and scepticism about their effectiveness amongst those learning to use the internet that was mirrored by those who did not currently use it. Our testing of public services available online in Caerphilly highlighted issues about navigation to services, lack of instructions and information about responsiveness, language, and lack of alternative means of contact. Online public services that are less than straightforward to use are little incentive to any users – let alone new or inexperienced users – to switch to digital delivery.

Digital TV channels or mobile phone apps are an interesting and under-explored alternative to the internet, but many questions remain about their usability and whether they appeal to non-internet users. Whilst these channels would undoubtedly get around the ‘hardware’ factor in digital exclusion, they do not necessarily address the knowledge and skills element. Instead the issue needs to be framed as one of engagement.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis suggests that a digital conundrum faces the Welsh public sector. On the one hand, a smaller proportion of people in Wales use the internet than in the UK as a whole, and amongst these smaller proportion use it to access public services. This means that the problem of digital exclusion from public services is potentially more extensive in Wales than elsewhere. On the other hand, it seems that only a limited number of public services are available online at present, with some of those that are available appearing to be less than simple or appealing to online users especially those who are inexperienced or lack confidence.

This situation generates a stalemate: there is little if any incentive for citizens (whatever their digital status) to go online to use Welsh public services because so few services are available. Equally, the public sector is faced with limited demand for services to go online, with the default remaining face-to-face, phone or postal contact. As such, whilst people who are not online are clearly excluded from a whole swathe of private services and activities that are delivered via the internet, they are not currently digitally excluded from Welsh public services.

It remains to be seen if the financial pressures on the public sector in Wales will precipitate a massive shift to online delivery of public services, and hence increase the urgency of how to address the needs of those excluded from them. If and when services do begin to be delivered online, there needs to be strong leadership to ensure that there is sufficient impetus to make the transition, that the change to online delivery is linked with digital inclusion, and that public services are effectively joined up in their approach.

However, the lack of progress in Wales to date is no reason to be sanguine - if the digital delivery of Welsh public services is uncertain, there is no doubt about UK-wide public services and in particular benefit claims. These are scheduled to be managed almost entirely online in just two years time. Detail of the implementation of this shift is awaited, but if it is implemented as suggested could well see Wales's thousands of benefit claimants forced to claim online. Access to online public services is a looming and pressing issue that cannot be ignored simply because Welsh public organisations are not make the change.

Efforts to encourage people online are already in hand. But these efforts may not succeed if the reasons why people don't use the internet and what prompts them to go online are not understood. Our and others' research suggests that there are complex

mix of factors here, associated with cost and equipment on the one hand, and awareness, knowledge and confidence on the other. In addition, despite the financial benefits of being online (albeit that these are offset to some extent by the costs) it is social and family reasons, plus employment-related reasons, that seem to be main driver for going online. Our research also suggested that people's experience of learning to use computers was very influential – there is a plethora of literature on good practice in adult learning, which needs to be built into digital inclusion activity.

Our research also highlighted the question of access to public services once they have made the 'digital switchover'. It is imperative that services can continue to be accessed by means other than the internet, e.g. by phone or in person, for those who cannot or will not go online or if a user experiences a difficulty while undertaking a transaction online. This does not mean that public bodies have to maintain an entire offline service alongside an online one – Deloitte for example suggest that contact centre staff could complete online forms on behalf of citizens who were unable to do so themselves.⁴³ Maintaining offline access is vitally important as the people who most depend on public services are those who also will most need help with accessing them digitally.

There is also the related question of access to hardware. The experience of Caerphilly demonstrates that there is considerable demand for free public access to computers and the internet. It seems that, notwithstanding Caerphilly CBC's considerable efforts, that there is scope to increase and expand the provision of public access computers.

Achieving what is effectively an expansion in a service during a time of public spending restraint will require some creative approaches and partnerships with other organizations. However, delivering services online is supposed to result in substantial savings, and we suggest that public bodies should allocate a small proportion of the savings anticipated from putting services online should be devoted to enhancing public access – a 'digital dividend' in effect.

Indeed, we would suggest that public services should be required to demonstrate that they have made arrangements for offline access and are putting in place provision for people who do not own a computer or internet connection as part of making the transition to digital.

Last, but by no means least, our research suggests that more could be done to ensure that online public services are easy to use and are of high quality. They must be accessible for disabled people, easy to navigate, give clear instructions and use easy-to-understand language, and provide alternative contact information, to name but a few. The Welsh public sector could establish a common standard for the user-friendliness of online services, which could help to drive a good citizen experience.

⁴³ Deloitte (2011) op. cit.

Suggestions for action

This was a small-scale study undertaken in just one part of Wales. However there are some important pointers towards action that public and other bodies could take to reduce the exclusion of citizens in Wales from digital services and especially from public services that go online.

- **Strong leadership is needed to drive the online delivery of public services in tandem with digital inclusion, ensuring there is impetus, joining-up within the Welsh Government and between public bodies, and above all, good quality services for Welsh citizens.**
- **When Welsh public services do go online, the Welsh Government needs to make a commitment that public bodies will retain offline means of access.**
- **Steps should be taken to increase further public access to the internet at a wide a range of locations, with access available on Saturdays and in the evenings. A benchmark of the number of computers per head and availability could be adopted.**
- **Investment in support and training to use computers and the internet should continue, building on best practice in adult education and learning.**
- **Public services going online must demonstrate that they have made arrangements to ensure nobody is excluded by the switchover.**
- **Online public services must be of the highest quality, both in terms of the online experience and in terms of responsiveness. A means of quality-assuring digital public services could be established to drive up standards.**

ANNEX 1 Organisations interviewed

Caerphilly County Borough Council
Learn Direct
Upper Rhymney Communities First
Race Online
RCT Homes

Soctim
Wales Co-operative Centre
Welsh Local Government Association
Welsh Assembly Government

ANNEX 2 Demographic Profile of Sample

GROUP	Number interviewed		
Silver Surfers	15		
New learners	15		
Non users of the internet	15		
Gender	Number interviewed		
Male	21		
Female	24		
GROUP	Under 30	Between 30 and 49	50 and over
'Silver Surfers'	0	0	15
New learners/inexperienced users	5	10	
Non users of the internet	1	5	9

Location of interviews

GROUP	White Rose Centre	Carephilly Library	Public spaces in Caerphilly
Silver Surfers	9	6	0
Learners	12	3	0
Non-users of the internet	3	0	12