

Social Digital Series: Digital inclusion and evidence-based policy: Insights from Wales



Ian Jones, Senior Research Officer for the Welsh Government, discusses findings from research into digital inclusion.

The past two years have seen a rapid development in the evidence base that underpins the Welsh Government's digital inclusion policy.

Previously, digital inclusion policy was based on practical experience in communities across Wales to show what worked in getting people online, but there was little in the way of robust evidence.

To address this, the Welsh Government devised a programme of research, including analysis of national survey data, mapping of internet use rates at neighbourhood level, and case studies of older people to understand the lived experiences of those affected by digital inclusion policies.

Much of the research undertaken to date has been brought together under two Welsh Government publications – the [Digital Inclusion Analysis Package](#) and [Economic and Social Benefits for Individuals and Wider Society](#). Some of the most insightful findings from the programme of research so far are presented below.

It's not just about access

Physical access to the internet is not a magic bullet that raises participation in education, the job market, or civic life. It is the way the internet is used, rather than physical access, that can have a positive impact on an individuals' education and employment prospects. In order to boost educational achievement and future earning potential through digital inclusion, underlying socio-economic inequalities need to be addressed. Even as internet access becomes more commonplace, socio-economic status impacts on the way it is used.

In addition, research from around the world continues to highlight that access to the internet is not, on its own, enough to get some individuals and groups digitally engaged. Once digitally excluded individuals are given the opportunity to explore the possibilities in a safe and supportive environment, they can become much more involved and positive about ICT in general.

Online public services – assessing the true cost

Existing evidence shows that there is *potential* to reduce transaction costs for public services by delivering services online. However, the true cost of online transactions may exceed traditional channels, such as telephone or face-to-face, where electronic services are not properly integrated and data need to be manually re-entered into back-office systems by staff. The web may be a low-cost channel – but only if it is properly integrated. In addition, digital innovation in the public sector should consider how potential benefits to service users – such as cheaper, more efficient services – are distributed across different social and economic groups.

The importance of age

Whilst income, employment status, housing, educational attainment and disability status are all related to levels of digital engagement, nothing is as important as age. While around 750,000 adults in Wales did not use the internet in 2010, more than 500,000 were aged 50 years or over. Older people were the least likely to be using the internet irrespective of their type of housing, income or activity level.

Choice or exclusion?

An important distinction is made between digital disengagement through personal choice and through socio-economic, health or skills constraints. Digital disengagement through personal choice is closely linked to age and life stage of an individual, with those who are not interested in using the internet tending to be older and retired people. This distinction between disengagement through choice and exclusion has consequences for how policy intervention is tailored.

The social housing question

The most striking increase in internet use in Wales over the last few years was among those living in social housing. Between 2007 and 2010, the proportion of adults living in social housing that use the internet increased from four out of ten, to six out of ten (the increase across all adults in Wales over this period was from six out of ten, to seven out of ten). This change among social housing residents was not anticipated and the reasons for it are unclear. Have such increases among social housing residents been observed elsewhere?

Where do we go from here?

As a result of this research, it has been possible for the Welsh Government to better target support to those most in need, and build relationships with organisations in the private, public and third sectors which are best placed to help deliver. The research has largely supported the initial assumptions made by policy officials but one perspective that has changed considerably is to appreciate that age is *the* main issue – previously, digital inclusion was seen primarily as a social class issue.

Digital inclusion rates across Wales will continue to be monitored to help target policy intervention. Whilst a significant body of evidence and analysis has been brought together over the past two years, our understanding of digital inclusion is far from complete and some areas require further investigation, including:

- A greater understanding of the causal relationships between internet use and educational, employment, economic and wellbeing outcomes.
- A focus on providing a more meaningful assessment of how digital inclusion interventions may be tailored for different disabilities.
- A better understanding of how different ethnic groups use the internet and the extent to which they are digitally engaged.
- Observing whether the large increase in internet use among social housing residents in Wales will continue – and also to find out how this increase can be explained.

More information about Welsh Government activities to tackle digital exclusion is available on our [website](#).

