

Senedd Consultation

COVID-19 and its impact on matters relating to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee's remit

Wales Co-operative Centre response, June 2020

About the Wales Co-operative Centre

The Wales Co-operative Centre is a not-for-profit co-operative organisation that supports people in Wales to improve their lives and livelihoods. We are working for a fairer economy. We help to create and retain wealth within our communities through the growth of co-operatives and social businesses and by providing people with the skills to take more control of their own lives and strengthen their communities.

Our projects are as follows:

- *Social Business Wales* provides intensive, one-to-one support to new start social businesses as well as those which have ambitions to grow and a viable business proposal.

- *Digital Communities Wales: Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being* works with organisations across Wales, in order to help people increase their confidence using digital technology so they can improve and manage their health and well-being.

- Our *Communities Creating Homes* project offers support and advice to new and existing organisations looking to develop co-operative community-led housing schemes in Wales.

We also deliver a range of paid consultancy services which are in line with our values and corporate aims.

Introduction

The Wales Co-operative Centre welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. The Covid-19 crisis has transformed the lives of people in Wales, in a number of different ways. One important example of a dramatic change has been the sudden digitalization of many aspects of our lives, from staying connected with others to shopping for necessities. But it must be acknowledged that while some people have been able to access the opportunities that digital adoption offers, there is the potential for those who are digitally excluded to be further marginalized. The National Survey for Wales 2018/19 found that while 89% of adults in Wales used the internet, that means 11% of us did not. Through the work of Digital Communities Wales, we can offer a valuable insight into the barriers that lead to digital isolation, what can be done to address these inequalities, and the benefits of encouraging digital adoption among those who are hardest to reach. The Wales Co-operative Centre would also like to note that we would be delighted to provide further oral evidence on this subject.

Summary

- Developments in digital technology have transformed the lives of people in Wales over recent years, and although this can lead to positive change, it also has the potential to exacerbate existing inequalities.
- The Covid-19 crisis has accelerated adoption of digital technology for different parts of our lives, from managing our health and to our children's education. As a result, reaching those who are digitally excluded has never been more important.
- The Covid-19 crisis has further exposed existing inequalities in wealth, age, and place in the context of digital technologies.
- The Wales Co-operative Centre and Digital Communities Wales have been at the heart of efforts to ensure that everybody in Wales, especially those most in need, have been able to access digital services during the Covid-19 crisis.

Digital Inequalities in Wales

Even before the Covid-19 crisis, the rapid nature of technological change was transforming the lives of people in Wales. It offers huge opportunities but creates a challenge of ensuring that those who are digitally isolated are not marginalized further by these advances.

The 2020 Lloyd's Bank Consumer Digital Index, based on a dataset of more than one million people across the United Kingdom, sorts individuals into four different categories of digital engagement; Very Low, Low, High and Very High. Across the UK, 33% of the population are in the Very Low category, 13% in the Low category, 43% are in the High category, and 11% in the High category. This demonstrates the clear digital inequalities that exist in the UK today. This data is also broken down by the nations and regions of the UK, and suggested that Wales has the highest proportion of people in the "Very Low" and "Low" categories of any nation or region of the United Kingdom, at 50%. The small sample size of this study must be taken into account, but the National Survey for Wales 2018/19 found that while 89% of adults in Wales used the internet, that means 11% of us did not. Clearly, there is work to be done to ensure those who are digitally isolated are not left behind as technological development transforms the way we engage with the world around us.

The four main barriers to participation have been identified as Motivation, Cost, Skills, and Connectivity. The Covid-19 crisis has had the most obvious impact in terms of motivation, as people are suddenly forced to go online to do things they have always done; connecting with family, doing the weekly shop, and managing their health. Robin Knowles, CEO of Digital Leaders noted that while the cost of digital devices has gone down, the cost of connectivity has gone up, and "data poverty" is becoming a prominent issue.

Digital Inequalities and the Covid-19 Crisis

The Covid-19 crisis has brought these issues even further into focus. According to Robin Knowles, CEO of Digital Leaders, COVID-19 had rapidly accelerated the process of digital transformation, "in 8 weeks achieving a degree of digital adoption that would usually have taken two years". However, Knowles points out that this has the potential to further marginalise those who are already digitally excluded.

There is evidence that the Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated existing digital inequalities. This is particularly important in the context of public health. Public Health Wales have stated that digital technology will be at the heart of their approach to improving health and wellbeing, helping them to "predict, prevent and treat ill-health". Their 2019 survey suggested that 2/3rds of people in Wales use digital technology to support their health, through finding information about general health (57%), tracking personal health goals (18%) and booking appointments (14%). However, there is significant variation across demographics – while 87% of 16-29 year olds reported using digital technology to support their health, this fell to just 24% of those aged 70 and older. The same survey said that while 84% of people in the least deprived quintile of the Welsh public used digital technology to support their health, this fell to just 51% in the most deprived quintile. The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated the need for digital services to manage and support our health. GP practices in Wales have launched a new system of online appointments with doctors and other healthcare professionals, extending video consultations to secondary and community care. It is therefore of crucial importance that those most in need of these services are able to access them and are not digitally excluded.

One of the key barriers to digital inclusion is connectivity, and the equality of infrastructure allowing for high-quality internet access. There is clear evidence of regional disparity in the quality of digital connectivity across Wales, with average broadband download speeds in rural Wales at 32Mbit/s, compared to 54Mbit/s in urban Wales. This also showed the gap between Wales and the rest of the UK, who had 43Mbit/s at the rural level and 64Mbit/s at the urban level. This is reflected in issues surrounding access to digital learning in Welsh schools. In order for all school pupils in Wales to be able to learn from home while schools were closed during the Covid-19 lockdown, the Welsh Government offered laptops to all pupils in Wales who did not have access to one at home, seeking to address an existing inequality that had been exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis.

However, the regional variation in the capability of learning from home is reflected in the difficulties in rural areas of having sufficient connectivity to access digital resources. Trystan Edwards - who has two children in Year 1 and 2 at Ysgol Cerrigydrudion in Conwy county, said it was "totally unworkable" for his family given their broadband difficulties. He said "Generally our internet speed is under 1mb and what we do have, I need to use for work."¹ Eirlys Edwards, head teacher of Ysgol Cerrigydrudion, said some of her parents would struggle with 4G - so work was

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-52478688>

being mailed out. "In some areas they are so remote, that's not a possibility," she said. "We have some parents working from home with two children and their internet connection is non-existent really - you can just about send an email.

Digital Communities Wales and Covid-19

The experience of Digital Communities Wales (DCW), a Welsh Government funded project delivered by the Wales Co-operative Centre, and its vital on-the-ground activities during crisis have given us a new insight into the impact of digital inclusion on equality and some of the barriers that exist in Wales.

The Coronavirus pandemic has seen our care homes in lockdown. Residents are unable to see health professionals face-to-face and are also unable to receive visits from family and friends. Digital devices are now the main way people can access important health consultations or stay in touch with loved ones. DCW has been working with care homes for many years, but the Covid-19 crisis has created an unprecedented and urgent need for our support. We're proud to be working alongside NHS colleagues, TEC Cymru and other partners to help care home staff.

What we're doing:

- 1) Thanks to additional funding from Welsh Government, we are loaning tablet devices to care homes. The tablets come equipped with mobile data, if required, and a range of useful apps.
- 2) We're delivering training to care home staff so that they can help their residents use the tablet devices. In the next few weeks, we will be offering training to over 1000 care homes across Wales.

This support is being offered to ensure that care homes have everything they need to use the NHS Wales Video Consulting Service. This service is delivered via a communication platform called 'Attend Anywhere', and will be used by general practices, hospital outpatients departments and other healthcare settings, allowing residents to access medical consultations from the home without needing to travel.

As well as enabling care home residents to access the video consulting service, our work will also mean that care home residents can stay in touch with family, friends and neighbours. We are providing training on how care homes can help their residents keep in touch and sharing useful resources. This will help to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, and ease anxiety for the residents and their loved ones.

Our team have been working with partners to ensure people are aware of our support and between us we have been in touch with over 1000 care homes across Wales.

More information on this project can be found here: <https://wales.coop/digital-devices-on-their-way-to-support-care-homes-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

Conclusion

It is clear that the Digital Communities Wales project has gone some way to engaging those most in need of support with accessing digital services during the Covid-19 crisis and therefore ensuring they are no longer at a disadvantage. Although this is a time of an unprecedented rise in demand for and necessity of digital technology, we risk further isolating those most in need of our support. The rapid technological developments were already fundamentally changing the way of life of people across Wales, and the crisis has been a catalyst for accelerating this even further. As we eventually leave the lockdown and find ourselves in a “new normal”, it is essential that digital inclusion is at the heart of our thinking about equality, to ensure everybody is able to access the goods, services and connections that they need.