

## **DIGITAL FAIRNESS SURVEY** **2023**

### **Introduction**

From an early age, children are introduced to Digital Services and products and use these as part of their everyday lives. Young people are growing up in a digital world, thereby creating a divide between the generations.

As the internet becomes more important to everyday life, and as more goods and services become primarily available online, we know that not all digital products and services are easy to use and there remains a high proportion of people who are excluded from society, due to not being able to access services online.

### **Why we wanted to do the survey**

In January 2022, Wealden Citizens Advice Research & Campaigns team wanted to understand the impact that Digital Services has on our clients, across the Wealden District. We felt it was important to understand how our local community views this.

One of the twin aims of the Citizens Advice service is to campaign to improve the policies and practices which affect people's everyday lives. Everyone who works and volunteers for us contributes to this work by identifying examples of unfairness and our team of research & campaign volunteers use this evidence to write letters, reports, and news articles with the aim of influencing decision makers on what needs to change.

### **Definition about what we mean when we say digital exclusion/disadvantage**

Digital exclusion is the **inability for an individual to make empowered and informed choice about their use or non-use of ICT-based practices** 1. Digital exclusion is influenced by factors such as age, disability, skills, money, motivation, and confidence. It can have negative consequences for social inclusion, economic opportunities, and personal well-being.

2. It is a problem that affects a section of the population who have unequal access and capacity to use ICT that are essential to fully participate in society

### **The Survey**



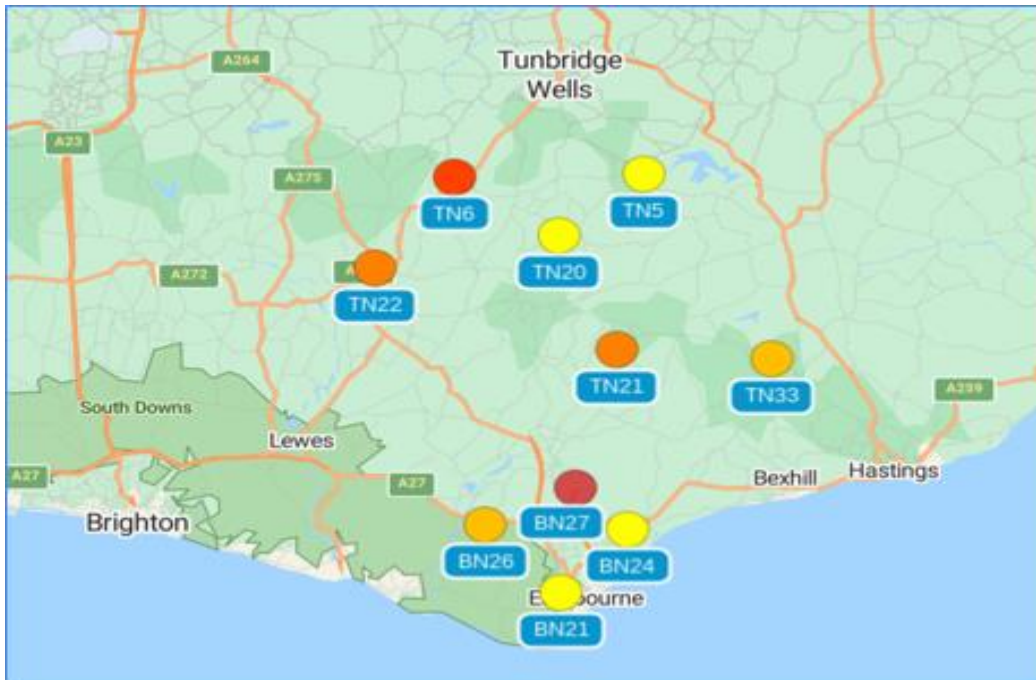
A paper survey was available as well as an electronic version on our website. The survey was anonymous, participants were asked to include their postcode. It was distributed through our offices, Wealden Libraries and Foodbanks.

We received 78 responses.

Please see link to the survey, below.

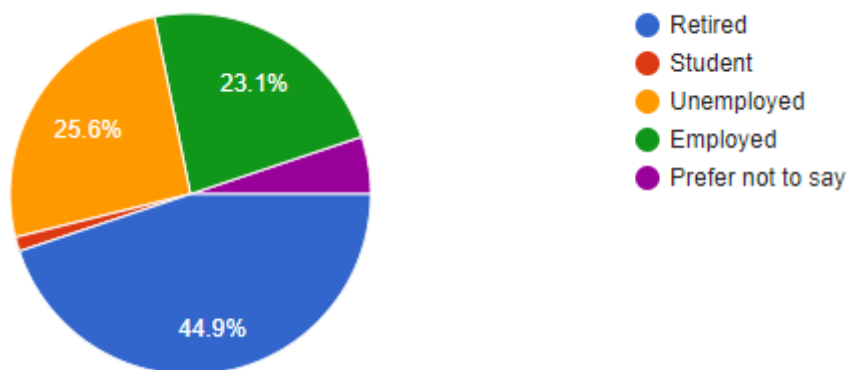
[Digital Fairness: Why are some people excluded? \(google.com\)](https://www.google.com)

## Demographic data



- 42% of participants were in the BN27 area, followed by TN22 and TN6
- 75% of participants were female.
- 41% of participants were over 65 years old, 18% were aged 45-54 and 14% were aged 55 – 64 and 25-44 years old.

## Occupation



**There are 5 main themes of exploration from this survey covering Digital confidence, access, affordability, contacting service providers and Digital exclusion.**

## Digital confidence

More participants report feeling confident using the internet than not with the average score rating being 3.6 out of 5.

44 participants (56.41%) reported a score of 4 or 5 feeling confident using the internet.

15 participants (19.23%) reported scores of 1 or 2 feeling not confident using the internet.

47 participants (60.26%) responded saying that they do not seek support from either a trusted individual or a charity/organisation to do anything online on their behalf.

Of the 27 participants who identified that they either sought support from a trusted individual or a charity/organisation to act online on their behalf 25 participants (92.59%) sought support from a trusted individual only and **not** a charity/organisation.

### Case Studies:

**- Client seeking a review on Wealden District Council decision not to renew her tenancy. The client, aged 57yrs, single with dependent children, has poor mental health and limited ability to read and write. Not able to use digital services. Client relies on her 17yr old son to read emails.**

**- Client aged 78, has lived in the one bedroomed flat for 25 years, he is on a rolling tenancy, and the landlord has increased his rent in the past. Client has been told his rent will increase from £580 per month to £700 per month. Client does not use the Internet but has a niece who acts on his behalf.**

More participants report feeling confident completing an online form in English by themselves than not.

Just over 25 of participants report confidence levels of 5 (32 participants or 41.03%).

45 participants (57.69%) report confidence levels of 4 or 5. This is consistent with the responses to question 2 relating to confidence levels using the internet.

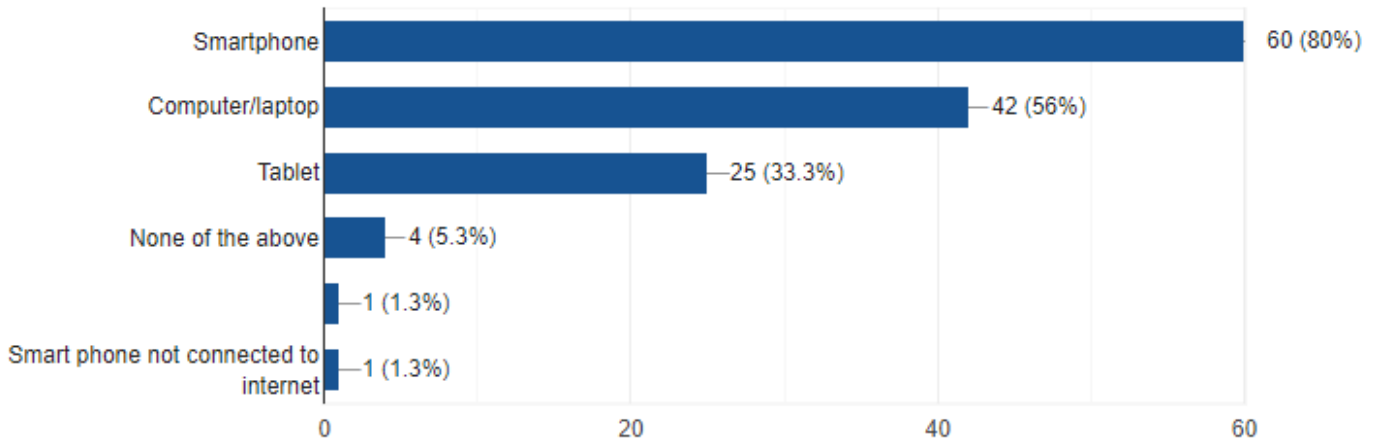
However, 21 participants (26.92%) reported lower confidence levels of 1 or 2.

Overall, those with the lower confidence levels with a rating of 1 or 2 in response to both questions 8 and 2 have almost just as little confidence using the internet as they do completing an online form in English without assistance.

28 participants (35.9% of all participants) report confidence levels of 1 or 2 when using the internet, and 26 participants (33.3% of all participants) report confidence levels of 1 or 2 when completing an online form in English without assistance.

However, more participants report feeling *not at all* confident doing a more complex task (completing a form online in English without assistance) compared to those who report feeling not at all confident using the internet in general.

## Devices and internet access



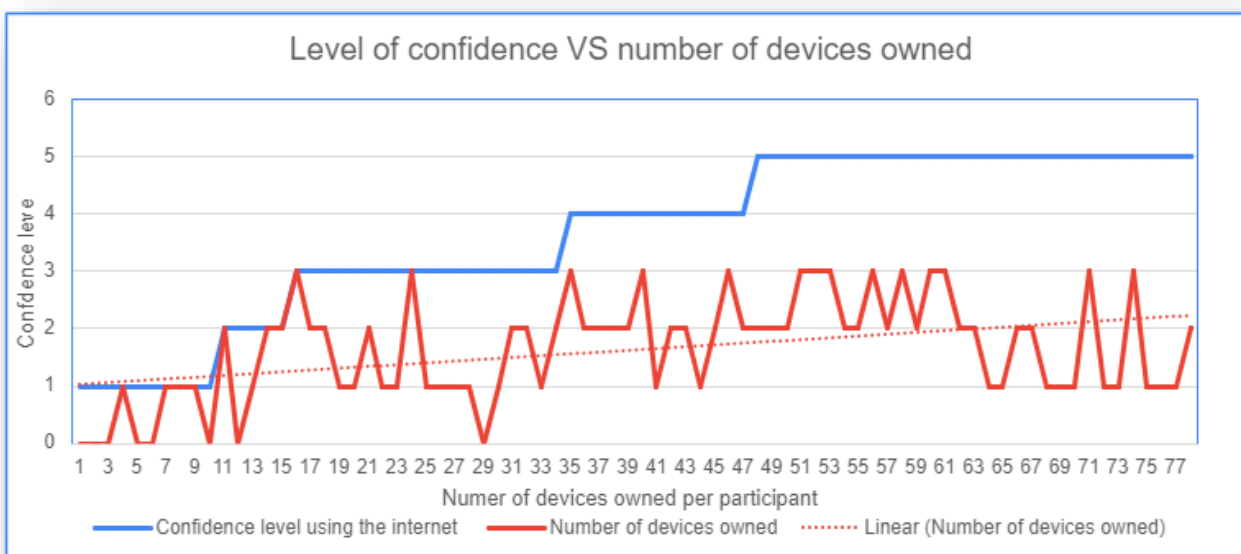
Where participants did not have a device, they rely on a neighbour or someone else device or have an old device that does not work.

**Cost is the biggest barrier to digital inclusion for those who are unemployed – this is less of a concern for participants with other employment status.**

The most common single device 26 participants (33.3%) own is a smartphone with 30 participants (38.46%) owning 2 devices.

The average number of devices owned across all 78 participants is 1.74.

Those with a self-reported answer of 'very confident' (5) in response to question 2 'how confident do you feel using the internet' own on average 1.96 devices, whereas those with self-reported as 'very unconfident' (1) own an average of 0.4 devices.



## Affordability

16 participants (20.51%) reported not having a working internet connection set up at home (\*1 additional participant was included in further analysis of this question making the total 17).

11 of these 17 participants responded saying that they did not have work internet connections set at home as they could not afford it - 12 including the participant who gave multiple reasons and cited this as one of them.

Overall, 70.59% of respondents who do not have working internet connections at home do not have it as they cannot afford it.

### Case Studies:

***- Client is a 74-year-old white British married man living in owned outright bungalow who is fuel poor. Client is currently recovering from cancer. As a result of limited income from pension (including Pension Credit) and increased costs - including recently having to buy a new boiler - client decided that the cost of broadband was too high and has cancelled his account.***

***- Client unable to access support/information digitally reliant on information sent in post - further impacted via the delay in Royal Mail post.***

## The Internet in Public Places

53 participants (67.95%) report not using the internet in public places for personal use/reasons. Over half of participants who do not have a working internet connection at home do not use the internet in public spaces for personal reasons.

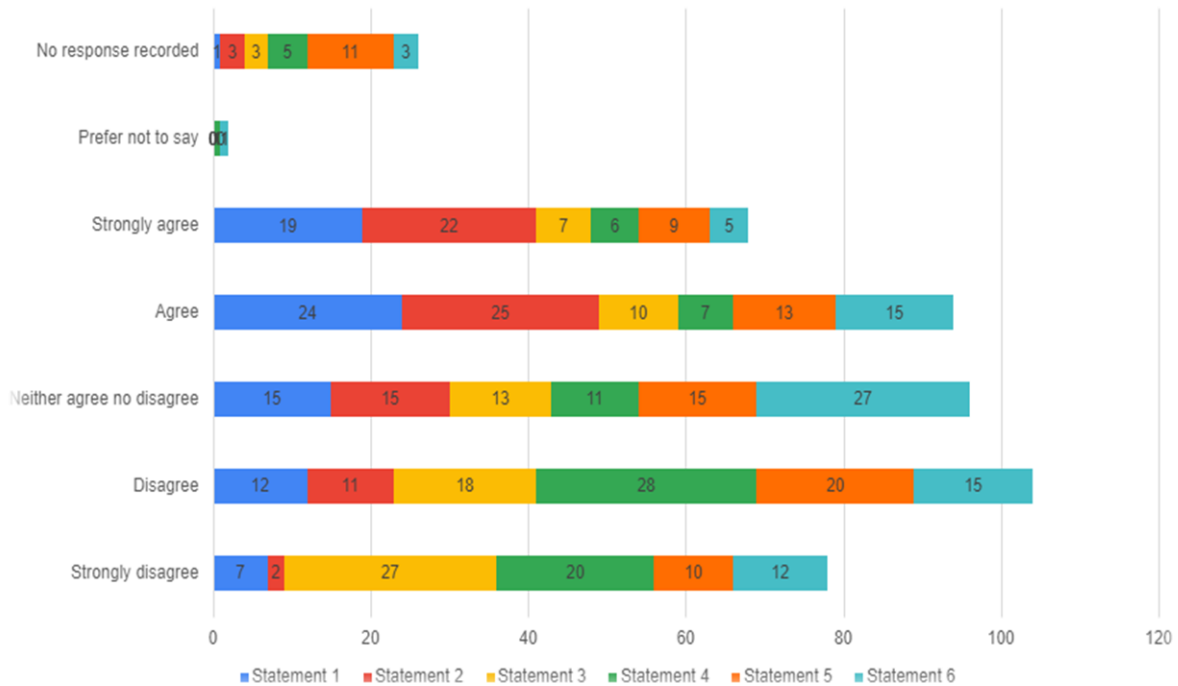
44 out of 78 participants (56.41%) reported usually primarily using the data on their smartphones to access the internet.

### Case Study:

***- Client aged 73 years, uses her phone to access the internet, she cannot afford to look at extensive info online. Client said she does not know how to use a computer. Client has been signposted for IT support at the library.***

## Comments

To what extent do participants agree or disagree with the presented statements?



### Statement 1: I feel that accessing services online makes my life easier

The majority of participants agree with the statement (24 participants or 18.72%). This was followed by 19 strongly agreeing with the statement (14.82%).

### Statement 2: I am concerned about my privacy and security online

The majority of participants agree with the statement (25 participants or 19.5%). This was followed by 22 strongly agreeing with the statement (17.16%).

### Statement 3: I do not have the skills and/or knowledge to use the internet

The majority of participants strongly disagree with the statement (27 participants or 21.06%). This was followed by 18 disagreeing with the statement (14.04%).

### Statement 4: I do not use the internet because it is too expensive

The majority of participants disagree with this statement (28 participants or 21.84%). This was followed by 20 strongly disagreeing with the statement (15.6%).

### Statement 5: I feel that I am missing out by not using the internet

The majority of participants disagree with this statement (20 participants or 15.6%). This was followed by 15 neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement (11.7%).

### Statement 6: I think using the internet is anti-social

The majority of participants neither agree nor disagree with the statement (27 participants or 21.06%). This is followed by 15 participants who disagree with the statement (11.7%) and 15 participants agreeing

## Summary

**More participants agree that accessing services online makes their life easier.**

**More participants agree that they are concerned about their privacy and security online.**

**More participants strongly disagree that they do not have the skills and/or knowledge to use the internet.**

**More participants disagree that they do not use the internet as they cannot afford it.**

**More participants disagree that they are missing out by not using the internet.**

**More participants neither agree nor disagree that using the internet is anti-social.**

**Over half of participants either agree or strongly agree with the statement 'I feel that accessing services online makes my life easier' and the statement 'I am concerned about my privacy and security online'.**

**12 Participants who answered to question 5 previously identified cost as a barrier to having a working internet connection set up at home and with 5 participants in response to the statement 'I feel that accessing services online makes my life easier' either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.**

23 participants (28.21%) responded to this question.

No participants listed access to local training or confidence building as their only answer - both these responses only appeared where participants selected more than 1 option in response to the question.

5 out of the 6 participants who selected 'I do not wish to use the internet', selected this as their only response.

50% of participants who responded to this question consistently report that they do not have a working internet connection set up at home due to issues with affordability across other questions.

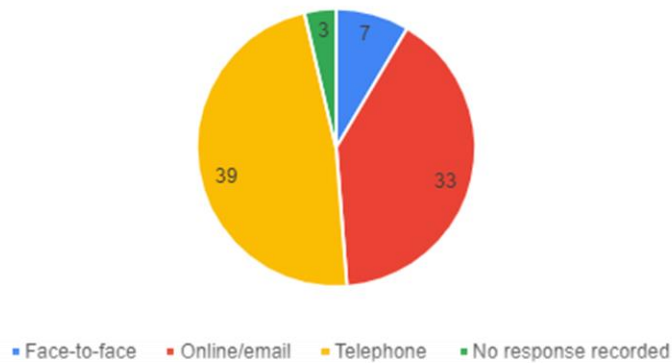
Participants who do not use the internet are less likely to use the internet in public spaces but are more likely to seek support from a trusted individual/charity or organisation to do things online on their behalf.

These participants are also less likely to own electronic devices or have a working internet connection set up at home compared with those participants who do use the internet.



## Contacting service providers

Preferred method to contact government services

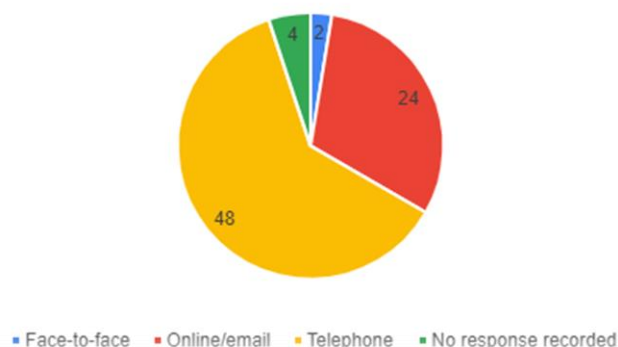


3 participants indicated that they like to contact government services and their utility providers by post in the additional comments section. 11 out of the 25 comments (44%) received across all the questions related to the difficulty in contacting providers. These comments also highlighted issues around the length of time it can take to connect to and speak with providers by phone and the frustration that this difficulty can cause.

Just under half of all responses (47.56%) to question 12 indicated that participants prefer to contact government services by phone. This is followed closely by online/email with 33 responses (40.24%) indicating this preference.

This pattern of preferring telephone contact and then online/email is repeated when we look at responses to question 14 and how participants prefer to contact utility providers. Here, 48 participants or 61.54% of responses indicated that participants prefer to contact these service providers by telephone.

Preferred method to contact Utility Providers

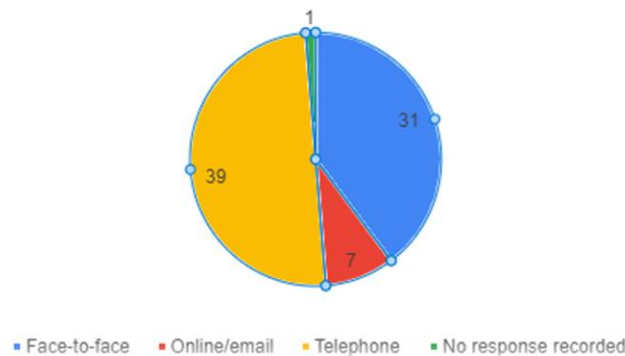


This is followed by 24 responses (30.77%) preferring online/email contact.

However, when we look at how participants prefer to access health services, 39 participants, exactly 50%, indicate that they prefer to contact health services by phone.



Preferred method to contact health care services



The second most popular response is face-to-face with 31 responses (39.74%) indicating this preference, with only 7 participants (8.97%) indicating a preference to contact health providers online or by email.

Out of the 238 total responses recorded across all three questions, over half of these were for telephone contact (126 responses or 52.94%) followed by online/email contact (64 responses or 26.89%) and then face-to-face contact with 40 responses or 16.81% responses indicating a preference to access services face-to-face.

### **Digitally excluded participants**

187 responses indicated digital exclusion or disadvantage was being experienced by participants.

The total number of participants who are experiencing digital exclusion or disadvantage across these questions is 69 out of the total 78 participants (88.46% of participants).

Most participants (21) have 1 recorded indicator and the most common factor for these participants, along with those who have 2 indicators, come from responses to question 7.

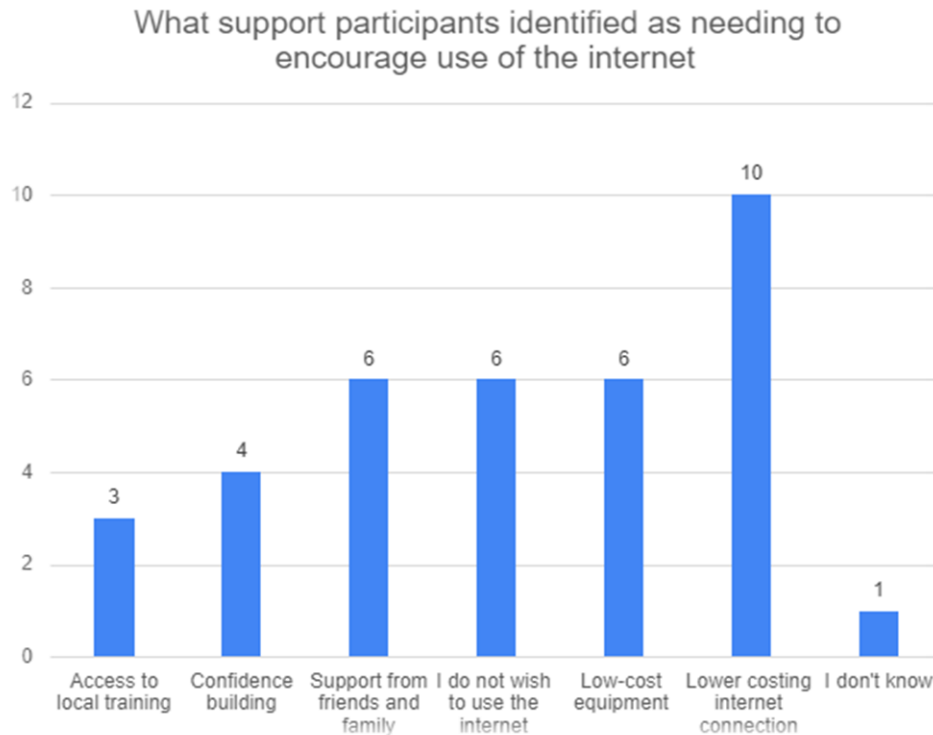
However, a total of 22 participants who are either digitally excluded/disadvantaged or at risk of this have 4 or 5 indicators - a total of 22 participants (31.88% of all participants with digital exclusion/disadvantage indicators) between them having 98 indicators - just over half of all indicators with 52.41% of all indicators belonging to these participants.

The complexity of participants risk increases with the number of indicators from primarily focusing on access to wi-fi and participants using mobile data to connect to the internet, to confidence completing tasks online, having others do things online on their behalf, and not feeling confident using the internet and needing support to do so.

### **Case Study:**

***Access to Wealden Household Support fund, Client has no internet access and must use the library to access emails. Wealden District Council do not have anyone who can assist clients with the application and there is no alternative way of applying, online applications only. Client could lose out on additional money to support through the cost-of-living crisis. Client would need support to make this application, even if he had access to internet as he is not IT literate.***

## NON internet users



23 participants responded to this question, between them selecting 36 options. 9 participants selected more than 1 category recording 22 options between themselves, and 14 participants selected 1 option each in response to the question.

No participants listed access to local training or confidence building as their only answer - both these responses only appeared where participants selected more than 1 option in response to the question.

5 out of the 6 participants who selected 'I do not wish to use the internet' selected this as their only response.

6 participants (26.09%) each also selected support from friends and family, and lower-cost equipment as part of their responses.

10 participants (43.48%) selected lower costing internet connection as part of their response.

When we look at how these 10 participants responded to question 4 'Do you have a working internet connection set up at home?', 6 of these participants responded with 'no', whereas 4 responded with 'yes'.

5 of these 6 participants who selected 'no' as their response to question 4 then reported in question 5 'If you do not have an internet connection set up at home, please tell us why not' with because 'I cannot afford it'.

1 participant responded with it 'would be no use because I can't use it'.

From this we can see that 50% of these participants consistently report that they are unable to access the internet at home due to issues with affordability.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, our findings are that –

Participants are more likely to use a trusted friend or family member to assist them online rather than a charity.

Participants are using their mobile data due to the costs of internet packages, for many the cost is a factor to accessing services online.

It seems that companies/organisations no longer want to talk to people direct only through email or chat boxes.

The Government departments often carry no phone numbers.

AI, chatbots are replacing people and unless there is mention of a vulnerable person in the household you remain speaking to a robot.

Changes in 2025 with BT going digital will affect many of our clients, bringing big changes.

## **Recommendations/findings –**

1. Services need to continue to make their channels that clients use to contact them through adequately resourced and helpful to ensure that clients are not kept waiting a long time to get through (particularly by phone), and that they are able to successfully get through. Link to work with DWP currently ongoing around client difficulties in using phone service. Companies/organisations should provide consumers with a contact phone number as often these days no numbers are included in any correspondence only an email or other form of IT link.
2. Building relationships with clients' needs to be at the heart of all outreach work, and any service that offers support to clients who are digitally disadvantaged or excluded need to prioritise this.
3. The price of WiFi/mobile data needs to be affordable and accessible. Not being able to afford WiFi impacts on ability to partake in Universal Credit Work related activities as well as most jobs require online applications, as well as impacting all other areas of their lives.
4. Those who are most digitally disadvantaged are less likely to use the internet in public places for personal reasons, and so are less likely to also come across support in these spaces.
5. Services need to make sure that support to complete online forms that are required for their service is available, or that paper versions are available and accessible to clients who are digitally disadvantaged and unable to complete these online.
6. Participants preferred to contact health service by phone and then face to face, fewest number of participants preferring to contact health services online.

## **Acknowledgements**

This report was produced by Wealden Citizens Advice Research and Campaigns team – Jennifer Jadia, Emma Lindsay, Carola Coles, Sam Manton, and Ann Kates.

We would also like to say thank you to everyone else who provided us with all the relevant information to enable us to complete this digital survey report.