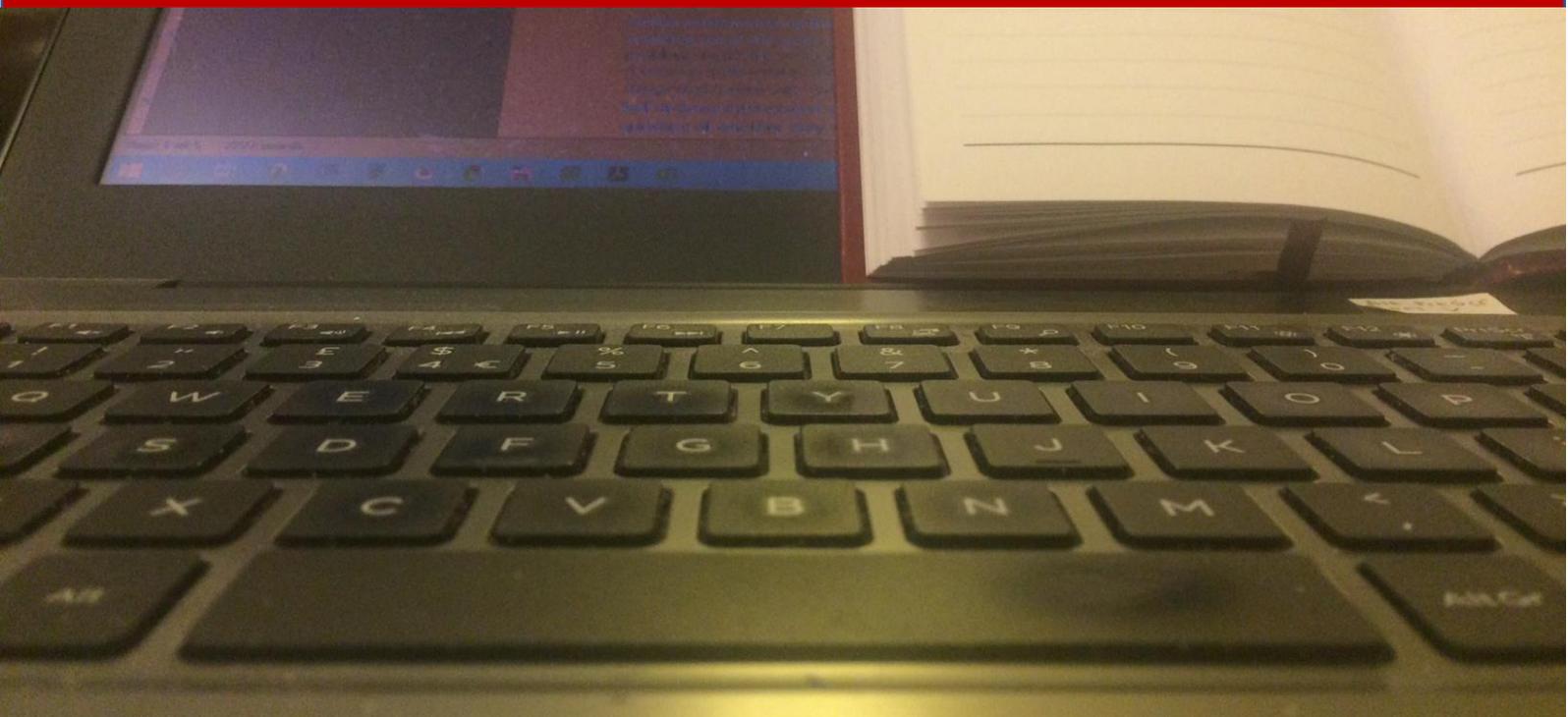


DIGITAL INCLUSION IN READING

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January 2021
research.reading.ac.uk/community-based-research



Acknowledgements

This research was carried out by the Whitley Researchers in collaboration with the University of Reading. Sally Lloyd-Evans, the lead researcher, worked with John Ord and with Sonia Duval, Elizabeth Ashcroft, Sandra Clare, Naomi Lee, Aneta Banas and Lorna Zischka. The data was analysed and the report drafted by Lorna Zischka.

Our grateful thanks are extended to all who completed our questionnaire and to the following organisations (and personnel) who helped to disseminate questionnaires and/or who otherwise collaborated in this project.

- Reading Voluntary Action (David Neale)
- Reading Borough Council (Michelle Berry and Jill Marston)
- Reading Borough Council Sheltered Housing (Kane Roberts, Georgia Rankin)
- John Madejski Academy (Paul Allen)
- Cranbury College (Audrey Hutt)
- The Palmer Academy (Rob Bruce)
- Weller Centre (Simone Prenderville)
- Whitley Wood Community Centre (Suzanne Knight)
- Blagdon Nursery School (Joanne Budge, Nicky Roose)

Contents

1 Introduction	3
1.1 Purpose of the study	3
1.2 Participant profile	3
2. Findings	4
2.1 Online knowhow	4
2.1.1 Who has the most and least online knowhow	5
2.2 Difficulties faced that make it harder to do things online	6
2.2.1 Inadequate equipment.....	6
2.2.2 Lack of knowhow and familiarity	8
2.2.3 Resistance to using the internet.....	9
2.3 The impact of the pandemic on online activity	10
2.3.1 Attitudes towards the move online due to the pandemic	11
2.4 What might help.....	14
2.4.1 What people do when they get stuck	14
2.4.2 Ideas to make it easier	15
2.4.3 Interest in taking lessons.....	16
3. Summary and conclusions	18
3.1 The problem.....	18
3.2 Who is disadvantaged and how	20
3.3 What might help.....	20
Appendix: Questionnaire	22

Digital inclusion in Reading

1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the study

More and more services have to be accessed online since the 2020 pandemic. This raises concerns about a 'digital divide' opening up, in which sectors of the population who find it difficult to access online services are placed at a disadvantage. This survey aimed to find out how people in Reading are coping, what the *barriers* to online engagement are, *who* is particularly disadvantaged, and what might *help*. Such information is useful to the work of Reading Voluntary Action's 'Get Online' project, Reading Borough Council and others.

1.2 Participant profile

70 people responded to our questionnaire which was circulated personally by the Whitley Researchers as well as via local organisations, mostly in paper format.

- Responses were captured from the whole range of ages, from teens to persons over 80 (the oldest interviewee being 94 years old).
- Women were much more likely to respond to the questionnaire than men, although 21% of the respondents were men.
- 79% of the respondents were White or White British, 9% were Asian or Asian British, 7.5% were mixed ethnic background and 4.5% were Black or Black British.
- 29% of respondents lived on their own and the others were spread evenly across households ranging in size from 2 to 5+ persons. 27% had school age children at home.
- 54% of the participants were from Whitley and the rest came from all over the rest of Reading and its immediate surroundings.
- 14% of the sample had no qualifications, 57% had secondary school or college qualifications and 29% were university educated.
- 20% of respondents rated their confidence in reading and writing English as 8 or less out of 10.
- 56% of respondents had a paid job. There were also 30% respondents who were (or had been, pre-Covid) involved in community groups and/or volunteering.
- 20% of respondents had poor health affecting their day-to-day activities.

It can be seen that our sample covers a range of demographic groups but with a deliberate emphasis on people from Whitley, and with more female than male respondents. The sample is not representative of Reading as a whole, and yet the comparisons between people in different social categories remains informative.

2. Findings

2.1 Online knowhow

It is important to determine one person’s online familiarity and knowhow in comparison to others, in order to identify *who* exactly is on the wrong side of the digital divide, and then to determine *what* it is that holds those persons back.

For this reason, respondents were asked if they were familiar with various activities online, such as emails, online shopping or internet banking. For each activity they were asked to select a response from, ‘never do this,’ to, ‘I find it difficult but I try,’ to, ‘very familiar.’ This is a summary of the results received overall, now ordered by decreasing levels of familiarity.

	Never do this	I find it difficult but I try	Very familiar
Searching up information on the web	17%	9%	74%
Emails	23%	10%	67%
Using social media	21%	16%	63%
Online shopping, payments or bookings	31%	6%	63%
Attending online meetings with other people	32%	9%	59%
Internet banking	37%	6%	57%
Submitting online forms to official bodies like the school, the workplace, the NHS or government	34%	19%	47%

Even though most people *were* most familiar with searching up information on the web, managing emails and using social media, it was disturbing to find that almost a quarter¹ of those interviewed *never* use email, since emails are the preferred mode of communication for many organisations and the gateway to other online activities such as banking, shopping and form-filling. Without using email, such activities become difficult if not impossible.

It can be seen that the area which causes the most difficulty is the submission of online forms to official bodies; just over a third of respondents never do this and a further 19% find it difficult. Again, this indicates that the shift to online communications during the lockdown may be disadvantaging a significant minority when it comes to accessing the services they need. Because form-filling is so important *and* an area of particular difficulty, it is deserving of special attention. Comments made later in the survey suggest that part of the solution may be to do with making the forms easier to understand and fill in, as well as providing on-the-spot help whilst working through a form (for example via extra information bubbles or chat options). The information received at *this* point however suggests that some forms of intervention need to run deeper as around half of those in difficulty would not even be accessing the forms in the first place. Getting familiar and confident with online activities such as email communications is fundamental to everything else.

Before we can understand who is not online and why, it is helpful to rank each respondent in terms of their familiarity with online activities. This can be done by summing up their familiarity with each of the online activities mentioned in the table above, and then placing them in one of four ‘knowhow’ categories:

¹ Exact figures depend of course on who you talk to and this sample should not be taken as representative of Reading as a whole. Having said that, the existence of high numbers of offline persons in such a diverse sample of persons interviewed is a cause for concern. Later in the report it becomes possible to work out which social groups are more likely to be offline.

Online knowhow

Category 1	10% of respondents	These are people who did not do <i>any</i> of the online activities (although one of the respondents in this category had tried doing social media)
Category 2	20% of respondents	Category 2 and 3 were people semi-in-the-know. They were assigned their status depending on the sum total of their familiarity with the various activities. ²
Category 3	34% of respondents	
Category 4	45% of respondents	These people were very familiar with all (or almost all) of the listed activities

It is now possible to look at the demographics of people in each of these categories to see who has the most online knowhow and who has the least. Secondly, it is possible to see which sort of barriers to online activity are most associated with reduced online knowhow (thereby revealing which are the most significant barriers). And thirdly, we can determine the demographics of people who face various barriers to online activity, again in order to pick up if there is a particular sort of barrier that affects particular social groups. Analysing data in these three ways will help to pinpoint those most at risk and why.

The next section considers *who* has the most and least online knowhow, also considering adjustments during 2020 and interest in lessons (questions which came up later in the survey). After this, the potential barriers to online participation are summarised.

2.1.1 Who has the most and least online knowhow

- There was no evidence of a gender divide in online communications. Males and females were equally likely to be familiar with online activity, equally likely to have *adjusted* their online activities during Covid and equally likely to be interested in lessons.
- Adults under 50 were the most familiar with online activity. Older people were more likely to find it difficult and/or to resist using online technology. However, there were some from all ages interested in lessons.
- There was no evidence in this data of an ethnic divide in online knowhow although people from ethnic minority groups were less likely than White or White British people to have adjusted their online activities during Covid. However, people from ethnic minority groups who needed help expressed at least as much if not more interest in lessons as White or White British people in need of help.
- Multi-person households tended to get on better with the internet. It would seem that having someone (especially younger adults) around to ask for help or to give an example of life online makes a big difference. Households with children may also experience more pressure to have online access (and certainly, people with school age children at home tended to have more online knowhow). Singles were not likely to say they had worse equipment; it was rather with knowhow that they struggled. Possibly corresponding to the help that they can access at home, large households were less interested in taking lessons than smaller households (even controlling for differing level of knowhow).
- The value of having people around; the link between online activity and more general inclusion extends beyond the household as well. Having a job or even just being part of community group (having controlled for age) were both associated with better online knowhow.
- Qualifications made a significant difference to online knowhow. The average person without qualifications was more than a whole category lower on the online knowhow

²People who 'never do this' score 1 point per activity; those who 'find it difficult but try' score 2 points per activity; and those 'very familiar' score 3 points per activity. Summed up over 7 categories, a person in category 1 scores 7-8; category 2 scores 9-13; category 3 scores 14-19; and category 4 scores 20-21

scale compared to the average person with a degree or post-grad qualification. Struggling with the English language was also linked to lower online knowhow and consequent exclusion, although education levels were the more significant factor.

- Lack on online knowhow was linked to being more likely to suffer from poor health that affects day-to-day activity (even controlling for age and qualifications). It would seem that people suffering from ill-health are another group at a disadvantage.

Overall, older people, those with less qualifications, those in poor health and those disconnected from others (via big households, via work and via community groups) were all significantly less online savvy than their counterparts.

2.2 Difficulties faced that make it harder to do things online

28% of our respondents said they faced no difficulties in doing things online, but far more (72%) mentioned one or more difficulties.³ In an open response, three main factors were mentioned.

42% mentioned inferior equipment	Slow or unreliable Wi-Fi or equipment was the foremost complaint. Moreover, not all online activities were well adapted for accessing via a smart phone. Although this was the most <i>frequently mentioned</i> barrier to online activities, it was not the most <i>important</i> barrier, since even people who were very familiar with online activity tended to complain about slow equipment.
35% mentioned difficulties related to knowhow, familiarity or ability	These people found the internet confusing or they did not know how to do things. Some of them also faced physical limitations such as stiff hands for small keys or difficulties in maintaining focus. Lack of knowhow was the barrier associated with being least likely to manage online activity; it is the most critical problem. However, there are also links to equipment issues, in that many of those who did not know what they were doing online did not have appropriate equipment either.
35% resisted using the internet - mostly (28% of all persons interviewed) they preferred other modes of communication, but some (11%) mentioned a reluctance to go online due to the risks of data theft and scams. ⁴	Many more people than this proportion said that they missed the personal connection when managing things online, but the proportion recorded here actively <i>resisted</i> using the internet because of their dislike. Much of this resistance was amongst those who were older and unfamiliar with the internet, but there were some from all ages and all levels of online competence who preferred to avoid it when possible, and likewise a range of persons who experienced fears of data theft and scams.

Each of these difficulties will be considered in more depth below.

2.2.1 Inadequate equipment

Besides the open question on difficulties faced that make it harder to do things online, respondents were asked if had any of the following at home:

³ The percentages do not add up to 100% because some people mentioned more than one difficulty.

⁴ Some mentioned both forms of resistance, which is why the two do not add up to 35%

	Proportion of respondents who had this:
Unlimited Wi-Fi	77%
A smart phone (a phone with internet access)	79%
A computer or tablet with internet access	83%

7% of respondents said they had none of the above equipment at home. Mainly this was because they were not interested in having it, and they were exclusively amongst the older generation.

"I have managed all this time without a laptop or computer and don't feel the need to have one."

"Technology is beyond me and my brain is tired."

Considerably more respondents (21%) said that the equipment they had did not cover the essential needs of their household.

Correlations in the data showed that the 8% of people whose only access to the internet was via a smartphone struggled more than average. Their comments suggested that it was harder to navigate websites or fill in forms, as not all are set up for viewing on a mobile phone. Moreover, managing the tiny keyboards can also be problematic.

"I use my phone to access the internet but think if I had a computer it would be easy."

"It is a problem using websites that aren't set up for phone access."

"I have limited use of my fingers; they get seized up. I can't always manage the buttons but I try. I can just about manage text messaging."

"Older relatives struggle with small 'keyboards' on smart phones and navigation through screens."

One third of respondents who said their equipment did not cover the needs of their household mentioned cost as being a limiting factor:

"My phone and laptop are very out of date. I sometimes don't have enough money."

"I can't afford a computer. I use pay-as-you-go mobile phone."

Whilst finances are an important issue for this third, the proportion quoting cost as the limiting factor was surprisingly small. Since *two* thirds of respondents did *not* feel cost was the main limitation, it is important to look a little closer at why people do not have the equipment they need. Correlations in the data would suggest that age and interest certainly played a significant role along with lack of knowhow.

Lack of knowhow, lack of familiarity with online equipment and lack of the right equipment were all linked together with statistical significance – where you see one, you are significantly more likely to see the other. This implies that people need help not only in getting the right equipment but also in using it. A minority of these will need financial help in sourcing the equipment, whilst the rest would be able to pay for it themselves but would need convincing that it is worth it – something that may be hard to achieve before a person has become familiar with what the technology can do. Also in the comments, some of those who did not have the equipment said that they did not really know what was available or how to go about getting set up – implying that knowhow was the fundamental barrier for them.

So then, although equipment issues were more commonly quoted as a barrier than knowhow issues, the link between 'knowhow' and 'lack of familiarity with online activities' was stronger than the link between 'equipment' and 'lack of familiarity with online activities'; regression analysis would indicate that changes in knowhow were associated with bigger differences in online participation, suggesting that knowhow is the more important barrier.

One factor making equipment a secondary issue could be seen from the finding that by no means *all* of the complaints about inadequate technology came from people unfamiliar with online activity; some of them (particularly complaints about poor connections and slow

technology) were made by people who were skilled at managing online activities and particularly by teenagers who were aware that extra speed is possible. In such cases, inferior equipment was not *excluding* these individuals from online activity, it was just making their advanced online experiences less satisfactory. Again, some people with slow equipment may face financial limitations, but others may not have updating their equipment as a spending priority or they may be unaware of just how outdated their equipment is.

Many respondents complained about their equipment even when saying their equipment covered the essential needs of their household. (Around 20% mentioned lack of essential cover whilst 40% (twice as many) mentioned equipment related difficulties more generally). Many of these people complained of slow internet or of "*Wi-Fi not accessible in every room.*"

"Sometimes the internet can stop working for me."

"Sometimes no connection."

"Slow internet."

"Internet freezing."

"Problems with the Wi-Fi have made it difficult to access things online at times."

Broadband cover is clearly an issue, but slowness and lagging is often a result of the slow equipment rather than slow internet, and more direct indicators of substandard equipment were mentioned in comments such as, "*the computer lagging and taking a long time to start up.*" "*Usually the audio is bad.*" "*My phone is very basic and small.*"

It would seem from this that many people are using out-of-date or inappropriate technology which they find it slow or difficult just because there is a tendency to keep working with you have got, rather than proactively seeking to spend on better technology. So besides the cost barrier, there may also be an inertia barrier, and a lack of understanding of or willingness to prioritise spending on better quality equipment unless something external precipitates change. As will be seen in the 'knowhow' section, a significant factor in changing this inertia and lack of knowledge is being around people who have the equipment and the knowhow to use it. It would appear that being connected to someone who leads the way and sets an example is useful in initiating a person to the online world and in convincing them that it is worthwhile to make the necessary expenditures.

2.2.2 Lack of knowhow and familiarity

Lack of knowhow was the factor that (statistically) was associated the most differences to engagement online. A third of respondents to this survey mentioned problems in this area. Some people mentioned specific activities that they had difficulty with (every person with a different problem although filling in forms came up multiple times):

"I don't know how to email or fill out forms online."

"Hard to use some online apps i.e. Zoom, Teams."

"Filling in forms."

"Not confident with apps."

"I can use the internet but I don't always know where to go to find things."

"Accessing medical services."

"Using online forms to get an issue sorted out with a service."

Far more respondents cited more generalised difficulties. They found the online world multifaceted and confusing (not surprising if you are not used to filtering through an avalanche of information and options).

"I cannot understand technology. I cannot take in what I have to do. I don't know how to do things online. Only text messaging or WhatsApp."

"Search Engines options are often confusing they need to be more basic."

"So many different things do same job."

"Confusing and too much to learn."

"I can only use it if someone is with me. I've been shown a number of times by my son how to work it but I can't even get the computer on by myself."

Things go wrong and not knowing how to resolve it saps a person's confidence. People are left feeling that the online communication is unreliable, and that it is better to manage things in person:

"I don't have the knowledge if I do something wrong."

"It always goes wrong when I try something new. I'm not confident enough to do important things on there like filling out forms and sending emails. When I have tried in the past it always goes wrong. I also really struggle using it to buy things that aren't my food shop. I have an Amazon account but can't work out how to use it."

"I don't know if using the internet for certain things like shopping is worth it for the pitfalls. It's really frustrating when something goes wrong, and you don't know how to fix it or it takes a lot of effort to resolve. For example, I had something ordered online by my daughter and there were lots of delivery issues, so it took 3 weeks to arrive. It's as simple as pie to go to the shops to get something."

"Prefer online if in hurry but no good if not confident in what needed"

"It's very difficult to use the computer so I find it much easy picking up the phone"

"I'm not that confident, I'm scared I might press the wrong buttons. I would rather speak to a real person."

It has already been noted that older people, less qualified people and those in poor health were the most likely to suffer from lack of knowhow. Moreover, having less people in the household, and/or or a lack of workplace links or links to community groups and volunteer posts were also associated with lack of knowhow. Being around people/ having the support of people who use the internet appears to be important!

2.2.3 Resistance to using the internet

A third of respondents resisted using the internet. They didn't like it or want to use it:

"I prefer the old ways of communicating."

"I don't do it."

"I am old fashioned and have no interest in technology, beyond is most basic elements."

One said that what they needed could not be resolved remotely. Some persons *feared* using it because of scams and identity theft. There were many persons apart from this third who didn't like the impersonal aspects of the internet, but the benefits outweighed the disadvantages and they did not resist using it. Many (but not all) of those who resisted going online were in their 40s and above and they were, on average, less familiar with online activities than others.

As many of the people averse to using the internet were also unfamiliar with doing online activities, some of this aversion may be reduced by increasing knowhow and understanding of the advantages. Knowing how to protect oneself from scams might also help; reducing the fear of data theft. It was interesting to find an *absence* of correlation in the data between not wanting to go online and interest in lessons. This likewise implies that at least *some* of those who resist using the internet are not completely closed to the idea, although others will be.

Details regarding *why* people resisted using the internet can be found under the 'negatives' of section 2.3.1, 'Attitudes towards the move online due to the pandemic'. The resistance is partly due to a preference for real human contact: *"It feels more human... more agreeable to be speaking to someone rather than a machine."* But there was equally a feeling that you are more likely to get what you want done when done in-person: *"When you actually speak to someone you feel more confident the things you are trying to do are definitely done. Not always confident online stuff has gone through."* Whilst the depersonalisation factor remains a barrier it can be noted again that confidence about being able to get things done could be eased by providing more support and knowhow, and links closely with the point made in the preceding paragraph

and under section 2.2.2, 'Lack of knowhow and familiarity.' Indeed, multiple people stated that the reason they liked face-to-face contact was that they could get immediate help when they needed it and answers to questions, so if the same level of support was available via the internet, at least some of the resistance to using it may be reduced.

2.3 The impact of the pandemic on online activity

It was proposed to the interviewees that since the Covid-19 crisis, much more activity has moved online. They were asked whether this has changed what *they* do online.

49% said no, it had not changed what they did online, and 51% said it *had* changed what they did. Those who noted changes talked of, "*Increased screen time.*" "*Meetings online, Church online,*" "*Study, shopping, contact with official bodies, contact with friends...*" "*Classes online,*" "*Dance lessons online,*" "*Teaching, setting homework, award ceremony's...*" "*Work at home...*" In all of these, "*I use the internet more, rather than going out.*" "*Meetings via Zoom and Teams*" were both mentioned as a new thing, plus, "*I video call family a lot more.*" Several people mentioned things like, "*I play more games on the computer now,*" and, "*I watch things on YouTube,*" and, "*I listen to music.*"

Given the amount of work and community life that has gone online and the massive changes listed by half of those surveyed, it was troubling to find that the other half said that their online activities had *not* changed. Are such a large proportion of the population are missing out? Are the isolating effects of the lockdown impacting them disproportionately? Significantly, the data indicated that although *some* shift in online activity was notable in every category of online competence, the greater proportion of change was seen amongst those who were fairly competent online, whilst the ones who struggled with online activities were also less likely to have changed what they do online (38% of those in competence category 1 and 2 said they changed their online activity whilst 57% of those in competence category 3 and 4 noted changes). This finding is certainly compatible with the theory of a widening digital divide.

The individuals most likely to have changed what they do online appeared to be those whose normal lifestyle had been strongly impacted combined with having some degree of education. Thus, people living on their own and who had been actively engaged in community groups were more likely to have changed what they do online (these being people who would have encountered great changes to their lifestyle). People with no qualifications at all were half as likely to have changed what they do online as people with qualifications of some sort or another. Hardly any people from ethnic minority groups said that they had changed what they do online, whether they had qualifications or not. These people were less likely to be confident in English as well. It could be that these people were *already* used to communicating online with dispersed family members. Having a job or not made no difference. Men and women were equally likely to have adjusted their online behaviour.

Those surveyed were asked if they had had much help and support through this change.

- 57% had had no support. Some of these did not *need* supporting, as illustrated by the comments, "*I have been confident using it for a few years now so no need for support,*" and, "*I picked it up by myself.*" Others were not *able* to access support however, which was seen in the finding that the highest proportion of those wanting the services of a help centre came from the persons in this response category.
- 11% said they had '*not much*' or '*very little*' help. One said that they only had support for work-related aspects.
- 32% said that they got help, and most of these got help from family: "*My sons showed me,*" "*My son helped me and I took my iPad into the Apple shop to get them to download games for me,*" "*Granddaughter and daughter have taught me everything and set everything up for me,*" "*My daughter set up all the online food shopping for me and helped a lot with teaching me how to use it.*" Family help is clearly the preferred option as

people responding in this category were not so interested in a charity or council-run help-centre. *"If I'm stuck, all I have to do is ring one of my kids."*

It is important to note what a high number of people require help with change – over 30% of those who had made changes had accessed help from friends and family and the same number again *wanted* help (they were interested in lessons) but had not been able to access it. This implies that support through change is very important, and offering support via a help centre could play an important role amongst those who do not already have help from friends and family.

Looking at this data on levels of support with change and checking each person's level of online knowhow, it could be seen that more than half of those who were making changes in 2020 and yet struggled with online activities had *no support*.

2.3.1 Attitudes towards the move online due to the pandemic

When asked to comment on the positive or negative aspects of the trend to move more activities online, it was found that:

- 40% had only negative comments
- 31% mentioned both positive and negative aspects of the change
- 29% made only positive comments.

Overall, people were more likely to give a negative response than a positive one. Some representative comments are added into the summary of comments below, and they explain the negative attitudes to being online that were mentioned under section 2.2.3, 'Resistance to using the internet.' A few persons said that although they were *"nervous"* about more things going online, they *"understood"* and *"accepted"* that this was going to be the way forward: *"I suppose it's called progress and I don't want to miss out."*

Negative comments:

Most negativity concerned the depersonalisation of human contact, and related to this was an aversion to *"increased screen time,"* which replaced face-to-face interaction. It is a worry that the loss of more personal modes of contact like high street shops makes these trends hard to reverse.

"I don't want everything to be online. It is so much less personal."

"No human contact."

"Little or no interaction with other people. A feeling of being isolated."

"It's a bit impersonal, I would rather speak to someone."

"Too much time in front of a screen is not ideal and I would much rather have meetings in person. I am resigned to them as otherwise I would miss out on seeing my friends and participating in groups but would much rather see people for real and not a small square on a screen."

"Hours spent staring at the screen."

"I see people on their phones all the time and sometimes they don't look where they are going. People need to get back into the real world again!!"

"The personal touch still has a lot of value to people. Going out to the shops means you can see people and talk to people if you are lonely."

"I live close enough to [shop and bank] in person and I prefer it that way."

"It's a shame everything is moving more towards online stuff. All the high street shops will suffer and there is nothing quite like face-to-face interaction."

"Bit concerned we will as a society lose skills of real-life communication."

Some felt nervous about managing things safely and efficiently online. It was felt that face-to-face contact was *"more effective"*; people were more confident about achieving what they set out to do, and especially because they can get help if they need it. Face-to-face contact also

helps people to engage more efficiently, which links to wish for human contact. As one person put it, *"the more personal stuff is sometimes easier talking to a person."*

"A bit nervous as I'm not sure how to do all the things online. I like seeing people and having help to do things."

"A bit worried I won't know what to do."

"Nervous and scared."

"I do not like being online because with doctors it is not always possible to diagnose a patient well... and when it comes to shopping, the picture and description do not always match what comes home."

"Sometimes can be difficult to get help due to no face-to-face contact."

"When I have an issue... I don't like going online to try to resolve it. I will always pick up the phone to speak to someone if I have a problem as I find it easy to get a response and explain the issues properly."

"When you talk to a person you feel more confident in the thing you are sorting being sorted."

"In person, face-to-face you can get answers to questions, see products, check out they have stock or alternatives..."

A couple of respondents particularly emphasised unequal access to the internet which leaves people without the right equipment, the right knowhow or the right ID marginalised - there is no way of working around such problems like there is in person:

"Unequal distribution of access to the internet, due to both cost and availability; not all the country has good signal or connectivity. This can exclude certain groups within a population. Most systems require a certain number as proof of ID (Government Gateway for example). If you do not have sufficient, there is no workaround. Not everyone who designs online content knows the rules, so they can exclude those with difficulties without meaning to."

"I am concerned that many companies/services assume all their users/ customers/ clients have internet and are digitally savvy... often a 'person' will have relevant knowledge/advice you don't get from a web page."

Nervousness about managing to get done what needs to be done online has already been mentioned, and on top of this was fear of scams.

"I do not like the fact that your personal data can be hacked."

"I never know what I can and can't click on in case someone is trying to hack me and steal my money. I think face to face shopping is safer so prefer to do my shopping and banking that way."

"I don't like giving any information about myself online as I know there are scammers who can get a hold of it."

"You are at risk."

"Too many opportunities for identity theft and scams."

"After being scammed I feel unsafe online. I am wary about putting any of my details online. Now I make sure I do everything through letters, phone calls and face to face to make sure I am giving my details to the right person."

"Is it a real company?"

"I find that the internet doesn't feel very secure and safe as I get a lot of spam emails and there are a lot of people who get scammed online."

A few of persons faced practical difficulties managing things (especially work) online.

Distractions were a problem and a couple mentioned feeling uncomfortable with video calling.

"Harder to concentrate. No motivation."

"It can be a great timewaster. You need to consider your audience and the message you want to get across, online is not always the most suitable."

"Teams was very hard to get to work. Hard at home with a child – distractions. It is expected that you have Wi-Fi connections."

"Sometimes get distracted."

"I find it hard to stay focused."

"It's easier to read body language in person."

"I am concerned about the increasing trend for video contact calling. I suffer from anxiety... the increase of video use makes this difficult."

"I am not so keen on how I look on screen! I feel self-conscious."

Lack of physical capability is also a problem, and correlations in the data revealed that people who can't manage these difficulties tend to avoid going online at all.

"My hands and fingers don't work properly anymore."

"I have trouble pressing all the buttons as my fingers have no feeling in them. So, I can't send an email or a text message. I make lots of mistakes when I try to do things online on my own."

"I think it is a good thing that I think I am a bit past it now!"

"My concentration is not good so I get tired of being online very quickly."

"I don't remember things."

Positive comments

On the positive side, "convenience" was mentioned – going online was said to make some tasks quicker, easier and more flexible.

"It is sometimes quicker to do things online."

"[It makes things] easier as I don't need to travel to return to work for meetings."

"More flexibility re work hours."

"Doing the food shop online is amazing, I should have done it years ago. It makes life so much easier."

"Efficient, low cost, automates routine things, saves time, enables those who have access to have more control, great for collaboration."

"I don't have to nag my son to take me shopping anymore. I think it is a good thing - more people should learn."

"I am positive about how easily everything can be accessed."

"Saved money."

Online access has also enabled connections and interesting activities to continue from home in spite of the lockdown:

"I enjoy seeing my grandchildren more."

"It has kept me busy and the boredom at bay. I think it's the way forward."

"It has given me a bit more to do instead of getting bored on my own."

"Don't need to go out of my home if I don't want to."

"Things can still happen. Otherwise they would've stopped."

"I can attend things online that I previously couldn't."

There was no obvious set of demographics that determined how positive one person was compared to another about the changes. What really made the difference was *knowhow* along with being appropriately *equipped*.⁵ Those who were competent online (and who had all the right gear) were a lot more positive about the shift to online activities. To some extent it could be the case that people who positively embrace change get themselves prepared for it in terms of equipment and knowhow, but causality could also run the other way with training and equipping helping people to become more comfortable with the shift. This possibility is borne out by the finding that those who were able to access *support* from family were significantly less

⁵ These assertions are made from analysing correlations in the data

worried by the trend to move online. These findings imply that providing training and support could make a lot of difference to how well people cope with the shift to online activity.

2.4 What might help

In considering what might help, respondents were asked about what they did when they could *not* manage a task online and, in an even more direct question, what would make accessing online activities easier. Finally, they were asked about their interest in taking free lessons to learn more about managing online.

2.4.1 What people do when they get stuck

Knowhow is clearly important and it was of interest to find out what coping strategies people resort to when they *cannot* manage a task online. Respondents were asked to tick all that applied out of the following options, as well as being given space for alternative comments. This is how they responded:

- 76% would ask a friend or relative. This is by far the most popular option, and is especially common amongst persons who were not familiar with online activity. *"I ask my friend with a laptop to sort it out." "I sometimes take my laptop to my friend to do it for me." "I ask my grandchildren." "If I wanted to do something new online, I would have my daughter come over to go through it with me a few times."*
- 47% searched up the needed information online, but, *"Only if I know where to look."* People who were *familiar* with online activity were most likely to find solutions to their difficulties in this way. An additional respondent said, *"I would persevere."*
- 12% got help or advice from a drop-in or phone-in centre. People of all skill levels were equally likely to select this option, although clearly it came as a secondary resort failing the 'ask-a-friend' or 'online search' options.
- 30% would *give up* on finding an online solution to their problems altogether. Again, this was the people who were least familiar with online activities and who said they struggled to know how to manage. 20% of all persons interviewed would try to resolve the matter in a different way (calling by phone or in person), but 20% of all persons interviewed had experienced leaving the task undone (around half of them after first trying to resolve the task in a different way).

It was shocking to note how many persons end up leaving things undone because of not being able to manage a task online. Indeed, 42% of persons in the bottom two categories of online knowhow said that they had ended up leaving tasks undone compared to 11% in the top two categories. This difference in capacity to get things done gives some indication of how severe the disadvantage is to people on the wrong side of the digital divide. The statistical significance of correlations in the data indicates that the leaving tasks undone was strongly associated with lack of online knowhow and familiarity, indifferent of the demographic group the person belonged to and indifferent of the quality of equipment they had. Those who left tasks undone were also significantly more likely to want lessons than others. This indicates a *desire for help*, even though a minority are not interested.

To summarise: personal help is important, and correlations in the data showed that those who could get help from friends and family were significantly less likely to leave tasks undone. Once people know enough to do so, they will also look up help information online. It would seem that help centres and call lines are a less popular source of help but important in the absence of alternatives. The data in this survey seemed to indicate that some people of all levels of online skill and all demographics were equally prepared to resort seeking help from help centres.

2.4.2 Ideas to make it easier

When asked directly (in an open question) about what might make accessing online activities easier, the desire for personal help again came through clearly. Some of this help was to do with basic and generalised training, but equally, there was a desire for on-the-spot chat to get people through a particular task. This sort of help could be usefully linked to websites in which forms need to be completed for example.

- Just over a third of persons responding to this question requested either on-the-spot help lines or general training. Comments on general training included,
"Training to use a computer properly."
"I probably need a few lessons."
"I need teaching how to use it properly. I've never been shown how to do it properly, just the lady in the phone shop showed me the basics."

It would seem from some of the comments that it would be particularly useful to have someone explain what to do on a person's *own equipment*, helping with the setup:

"Help to be shown how to use it... If someone can get it on and running for me that would be great."

"Someone to show me once what to do."

Regarding specific tasks the following sort of on-the-spot help was requested:

"To make some online calls so that people can explain it if you don't understand."

"A help number."

"Live chat and support when you need it."

"Doing it with someone."

"An easy-to-use computer or somewhere I could go where I could get help to do it."

- Besides the call for personal help, five more persons suggested that printed instructions to follow or clear videos/online tutorials would help if they could only get hold of them. It was emphasised that the instructions need to be "*simple*" and "*easy*" to follow.
- Requests for equipment (both *affording* and *obtaining* appropriate technology) were also mentioned.

"A good device."

"An easy-to-use computer."

"Improved Wi-Fi coverage" (this commentator added that there are solutions but that these are "expensive relative to need/gain,")

"Having a quicker laptop and more reliable Wi-Fi."

"Making bills cheaper."

It is notable however that less than half the number of people asked for equipment help as those who asked for knowhow support. Once again, although problems with technology are the most frequently quoted problem and need to be taken into consideration, the reason for *exclusion* centres more around lack of knowhow. Having someone to call on is the foremost request.

- Mention was also made of ensuring websites are compatible with phone screens, and of making websites as simple as possible to negotiate.
- 21 people did not answer the question, and of the remainder who did, eight said they have no need for help "*it is easy as it is,*" "*I am able to access what I need to*" "*I feel very confident accessing everything online already*". Six said they did not know what would help: "*Not sure,*" and "*No idea.*" Five indicated that nothing could help because they were not interested in going online or in doing more than they already do. "*Nothing would help... I refuse to conform to the increasing trends that are a result of a pandemic.*" "*Nothing – I just rely on my granddaughter.*" "*I don't really know – I don't want to use it for anything other than games.*" One person even suggested that the only

help would be, "A new brain!" Interestingly however, even a few of the people who responded in these ways were still interested in taking lessons.

2.4.3 Interest in taking lessons

When respondents were asked directly whether they were interested in free sessions to teach them more about managing online, 42% of respondents expressed interest, a further 9.5% expressed *conditional* interest, and 48.5% were not interested.

Many of the 'noes' were not interested because they already knew what they were doing:

"Usually I know how to do an activity or am able to find out."

"Not for me but a good idea."

"N/A."

Correlations in the data certainly affirmed that those who did not struggle with knowing how to do things were less likely to want/need lessons. There were some who were not interested for other reasons however – they did not feel they had the capacity to learn:

"I wouldn't have the time even though I would like to."

"Not at my age."

"Done it for weeks and still didn't understand it."

The 'maybes' said that they were interested but depending on where it was available, depending on what aspects of online information was being taught and/or depending on the learning style:

"Only if I wasn't rushed; I take information in slowly." "I don't want to be embarrassed." "It depends what level."

The 'yeses' frequently expressed that they although they would like lessons they do not know where they could get them. This is a real problem – although around half of all people interviewed expressed interest in lessons, it will be difficult to get the information out to them about where lessons are being held. Moreover, many might be interested in theory but find it unnerving to join in practice. Some of the comments were extra affirmative though such as, "Yes definitely" and "Yes please!" One person said, "Great idea! It would be good to link up at the Reading Borough Council Older Person's Day, usually run in October. I volunteered there and it was a common query."

When asked for location suggestions, local community centres such as the Weller Centre or Whitley Wood Community Centre or Reading Library were mentioned (depending on where people live). One person suggested lessons via Zoom.

Demand for lessons were highest amongst people who struggled to manage online activities but were having a go (well over half the respondents were interested). Somewhat less interest was shown by the entirely disengaged – under half wanted lessons, and a proportion of the rest simply wanted someone to do things for them or wanted to avoid the internet altogether. Many of this minority were older people who had care structures in place to help them manage without going online themselves. The least interest was shown by those very familiar with online activities – many of whom did not even need lessons. Even amongst those with the most online knowhow however, almost a third expressed interest in lessons. The following table illustrates these figures in more detail:

Online knowhow	% of persons wanting lessons
Category 1 (least knowhow)	43%
Category 2	75%
Category 3	50%
Category 4 (most knowhow)	32%

Beyond the degree to which people struggle with knowhow, there was no variation in the demographics/social groups to suggest that one social group wanted lessons more than another.

In terms of *what* online area people are most interested in improving in or learning how to do, these are the suggestions given (not including the responses of people who did not need lessons).

- The top priority was managing online shopping.
"It would be so useful to know how to do online shopping and banking and do it safely."
"I would like to sit in my armchair and press a few buttons and get my food shopping done."
"Understanding how to order things online."
"I want to be able to have the confidence and know how to buy other things online like clothes and shoes. At the moment I can only do the food."
- As a close second, people were interested in managing social media (including Zoom) in order to connect with family and friends.
- Paying bills online and managing online banking, keeping *safe* online, learning how to fill in forms, managing online study and work and online searches, using email, attaching things to emails and using apps including Word all received multiple mentions. Even playing games got a mention.
- Some people wanted more general help, right from the beginning. For example,
"All of it; it would be nice to see what it is all about."
"Having the confidence to try new things online on my own."
"If I knew how to do it and felt confident it would make life so much easier." (said by a person shielding due to health conditions).

When asked what steps they might take in order to reach their learning goals, it was clear that a majority of people feel most comfortable seeking help from people they know. Again, we see the importance of personal connections – in the family, but also mixing in community groups, in the workplace and amongst friends.

3. Summary and conclusions

70 people from around Reading (and particularly from Whitley) responded to a questionnaire about their online engagement. The questionnaire asked them what they did online, what things helped (or might help) them, and what things held them back. The aim was to find out what forms of intervention might be most useful and to whom.

3.1 The problem

Online activities during the 2020 lockdown had been valuable to many of the respondents, enabling social and work connections to be maintained, enabling them to shop and to resolve problems remotely, and bringing outside interests and activities into their homes. *"Doing the food shop online makes life so much easier ... I should have done it years ago." "I can attend things that I previously couldn't." "Saves time." "Have more control."* In spite of this, almost half of those interviewed said that lockdown had *not* changed what they did online, raising a question of whether they were being excluded from some of these benefits. Some of these people could already have been fully engaged online. Alternatively, they may not have experienced enough change in lifestyle to precipitate a change in behaviour. However, a closer look at the data suggests that the greater proportion of people who saw no change since lockdown were those with the *least* online knowhow. Likewise, those with no qualifications at all tended to see less change than those with qualifications. These findings are compatible with the theory of a widening digital divide.

Just over half (55%) of the respondents to this survey were less than familiar with all (or all but one) of seven common online activities.⁶ These seven online activities, recorded here in decreasing order of familiarity, included finding out information, emails, social media, shopping and bookings, attending online meet-ups, banking, and filling in forms. The activity the respondents struggled with the most was filling in forms online for official bodies. Almost half struggled with this, many of whom never did it at all. As more and more services shift online, this could put them at a distinct disadvantage.

Part of the requested solution was for easier to understand websites with an option to get on-the-spot chat help. However, the key problem runs deeper, with many people finding the online world *"confusing."* When things go wrong it saps their confidence, and then they would rather manage things in person in order to get help and to be assured that things are properly resolved. *"I cannot understand technology. I cannot take in what I have to do." "I'm not confident enough ... when I have tried in the past it always goes wrong." "I like seeing people and having help to do things."* Sentiments of this kind were associated with lack of familiarity with online activities more generally. Indeed, almost a quarter of the respondents said they had never got as far as using *email*, which is a *pre-requisite* to most other online transactions. Beyond the details of specific tasks therefore, it is important to consider the more general barriers to online engagement. A majority of respondents (72%) mentioned one or more barriers:

Barrier 1: Lack of knowhow and lack of support

The most important barrier (in terms of its association with digital exclusion) was lack of knowhow. As has been said, people found the internet confusing, and they were not confident they could successfully manage what they needed to do. They were not able to access *help* in the same way that they could if they spoke to someone in person, and this lack of access to help was a key concern. *"When you talk to a person you feel more confident in the thing you are sorting being sorted."*

⁶The survey was not representative of Reading's general population, but it still covered a variety of people, ages and skill levels - 29% were university educated for example.

If people cannot solve their problems online and have no in-person alternative, a worrying proportion end up leaving the task undone. 42% of persons in the lower two categories of online knowhow said they would leave a task undone compared to 11% in the upper two categories. This finding again highlights the severity of disadvantage to people on the wrong side of the digital divide. Correlations in the data showed that people who left tasks undone were significantly more likely to want lessons than others, indicating that the majority have a *desire* for help and change.

Data analysis revealed that people were much more likely to get things done if they could get support. Moreover, it revealed that a majority of respondents had only managed to change their online behaviour during the Covid lockdown with the support of other people. In this context, it is concerning to find that more than half of the people who faced online changes in 2020 and yet struggled with online activities had *no support*.

Barrier 2: Lack of equipment

Although lack of knowhow was the key thing holding people back, lack of knowhow was often linked to having inadequate equipment as well. Around 40% of respondents to this survey complained of unreliable Wi-Fi coverage and slow internet – many people (and especially those who were unused to the internet) may have been using out-of-date equipment. The equipment they had did not necessarily exclude them from online activity, but it made their experience less attractive. 21% of respondents (particularly older people and people who struggled with online knowhow) said their equipment did not cover the essential needs of their household.

Most (71%) of the survey respondents had a smart phone *and* a computer or tablet. The few who could only access the internet via a smartphone were at a particular disadvantage. They said it was harder for them to navigate websites or forms, and managing the tiny keyboards was also problematic.

Cost was a problem for about a third of those who said their equipment did not cover the needs of their household, but others were limited by not knowing what to get and how to use it, by inertia (being used to managing as things are), and a few by actively *resisting* change. Only five respondents to this survey said that they had no smart phone, no computer, no tablet and no Wi-Fi at home, and these were exclusively of the older generation who said they were not interested.

Barrier 3: Resistance

A third of those interviewed *resisted* using the internet. These were particularly (but not exclusively) amongst the older generation. Much of their resistance was linked to a lack of confidence in being able to get things done online – a problem that could be alleviated by increasing knowhow and online support. Some of the resistance was to do with fearing the risks from data theft and scams – another issue that may be alleviated with more knowhow and awareness. However there were others who resisted the internet because they wanted to keep interpersonal connections *live* - the internet should not be *replacing* face-to-face communications. These were people from all ages and all levels of qualification. A smaller number of (older) people faced physical difficulties going online such as stiff hands for small keys or difficulties in maintaining focus. Moreover, there were a minority who simply could not take starting from scratch. *"Technology is beyond me and my brain is tired." "I have managed all this time without a laptop or computer and don't feel the need to have one."*

Overall, when asked to comment about the positive or negative aspects of the *trend* to move activities online, more people had negative comments than positive ones. There was more negativity amongst people without adequate knowhow or equipment, and amongst people without the support of others to help them through the changes.

3.2 Who is disadvantaged and how

Several social groups were less familiar with online activities than their counterparts. (And correlations in the data revealed that knowhow was the big problem rather than their equipment being so much worse than that of other people). These were:

- Older people. Older people had had less practice, and many had little confidence that they would be able to get things done successfully online. Some of them did not even *want* to go online.
- Those with less qualifications: Again, these people were less confident online, although they were at *least* as keen to be online as the highly qualified.
- People in poor health. Likewise, as keen as others but little knowhow.
- People who were disconnected from others. This included people living in small households, people without a job and people outside of community groups. Being around people who were familiar with online activities is very important for learning by example, and also for getting support and advice. People without this contact had less chance to become familiar with online activities themselves.

As for the youngest age group (under 20s), these were fairly tech savvy but not quite as confident as working-age adults and somewhat more concerned about scams and identity theft. They were at least as open as other age-groups to getting training and support. The request they expressed *most* clearly was for faster tech, even when they had access to the basics.

3.3 What might help

This research showed that becoming more familiar with the online world and how to negotiate it involves the following:

1. Being around people who use the internet so as to become familiar with it and inspired about what it can do. Thus people in multi-person households, those with school-age children at home, those in work or even in community groups or volunteer posts were all more familiar with managing online communications than their counterparts. These connections also helped them access support along the way (see point 2):
2. Being assured of help and support along the journey. A majority of people who had adjusted their online behaviours in 2020 needed support to do so. Moreover, those who *did* get support were significantly less likely to leave a task undone and were significantly less worried by the trend to move things online. Types of help which came up included:

- a. Help with obtaining the right equipment.
A laptop or tablet is of value besides a smart phone, *and* adequate Wi-Fi coverage (able to reach all the necessary rooms).
 - i. Some of this help is financial
 - ii. At *least* as much is about helping people know exactly what they need to buy.

For most respondents in this survey, if they knew what they were doing and had an example from others, the tech was likely to follow. There could well be cases however in which getting the right equipment has helped to precipitate trial and error learning. Although having the right equipment is fundamental, this data revealed that *twice* as many people, when asked what would help, asked for help via general training and on-the-spot support.

- b. Help is needed to get the equipment set up and running (obtaining it is not enough).
- c. Training on how to use the different functions was asked for, and half of all respondents expressed interest in taking lessons - especially those who were trying to get online but struggling.

- i. Being able to receive training using one's *own device* was thought to be helpful to some.
- ii. Some felt that training could be backed up by take-home instructions or pointers to online videos so that they can practice on their own.
- iii. Filling in forms for official bodies was the task people struggled with the most. However, when asked what they wanted to learn, a whole variety of priorities were mentioned. The most popular request was to learn how to shop online and secondly, how to manage social media so as to stay in touch with friends and family. Starting where people are at is important for building up general confidence and knowhow, and will often involve learning a wider range of key tasks like managing emails. Some people did not even *know* where they should start however, and were open to anything.
- iv. Training to stay *safe* online was very important to some.
- d. Apart from general training, many respondents wanted someone on call; they wanted the assurance that they would have someone to turn to when unsure or when things had gone wrong.

Respondents indicated that friends and families were their first-choice line of support, but *those who knew how*, were equally happy to look things up online. Those not able to access support in these ways were significantly more likely to want the services of a help centre. People of all ages and levels of skill and social group were equally prepared to resort to seeking help from help centres.

Knowing *where* to get this training and support is a problem for many. Having lessons in local community centres or libraries was suggested. Even lessons via Zoom were suggested.

- 3. Some comments implied that organisations and web designers could help by
 - a. Making websites easier to understand and negotiate;
 - b. Ensuring compatibility with smart phone screens;
 - c. Adding information bubbles and chat options to web pages.
 - d. Making sure there are work-arounds for people who do not tick all the right boxes or who are not able to manage online.

Note that people are often overwhelmed by information, so *simplicity* is of essence.

Also when it came to training, comments were made such as, "*Only if I wasn't rushed; I take information in slowly.*"

Even amid the efforts to narrow the digital divide and to broaden access to online resources, the downsides of internet communications need to be borne in mind and the value of personal interactions affirmed for everyone: "*There is nothing quite like face-to-face interaction.*"

Appendix: Digital exclusion in Reading questionnaire

This research is being carried out by the Whitley Researchers in collaboration with the University of Reading. More and more services have to be accessed online and we are trying to find out how people are coping and what might help. The data collected will be used to inform, amongst others, the work of Reading Voluntary Action's 'Get Online' project.

Any responses you give to this questionnaire are anonymous and will not be used to identify you. You do not have to respond to this survey and you can skip any questions you do not want to answer.

By proceeding with this questionnaire, you consent to your responses being included in our dataset.

1a. Do you have any of the following at home (tick all that apply):

- Unlimited Wi-Fi
- A smart phone (a phone with internet access)
- A computer or tablet with internet access
- None of the above

1b. Does what you have cover the essential needs of your household?

- Yes
- No. (If no) what are the limiting factors to covering essential needs? e.g.
 - Cost
 - Other limitations (please state) ...

2. Which of the following are you familiar with doing? (tick the response that fits)

	Never do this	I find it difficult but I try	Very familiar
Emails			
Attending online meetings with other people			
Using other social media			
Searching up information on the web			
Internet banking			
Online shopping, payments or bookings			
Submitting online forms to official bodies like the school, the workplace, the NHS or government			

3a. Since the Covid-19 crisis, much more activity has moved online. Has this changed what you do online? Yes / No

3b. If yes, please tell us:

- In what way has your online activity changed?
- Did you get much help and support through this change?
- What are the positive or negative aspects of the change?

4. How do you feel about the trend to move more activities online?

e.g. positive, negative, confident, nervous

5. What (if anything) don't you like about being online? And what (if anything) makes alternatives like managing in person or by telephone more appealing?

6. Please tell us about any difficulties you face that make it harder to do things online?

7. If you cannot manage a task online, what do you do? (tick all that apply and put a star next to your most frequent solution)

- Ask a friend/relative
- Search up the needed information online
- Get help/advice from a drop-in or phone-in centre
- Avoid using the online route altogether and try to resolve the matter in a different way
- Leave the task undone
- Other (please state) ...

8. What might make accessing online activities easier – what would help?

9. If free sessions were available to teach you more about managing online, would you be interested?

(If yes) where could you easily get to for lessons?
(Name a locality or community centre)

10a. What online area would you most like to improve in – is there something you particularly want or need to do online but can't?

e.g. for work, study, health or leisure. Connecting with family and friends, shopping etc.

10b. What steps might you take to achieve this?

About you:

Sex: Male / Female / Prefer to self-identify

Age: under 20; 20-29; 30-39; 40-49; 50-59; 60-69; 70-79; 80+

Ethnicity: Asian or Asian British / Black or Black British / Mixed ethnic background /
White or White British / Any other ethnic background ...

Number of people in your household:

First half of postcode:

Highest qualification: None / Secondary school or college / Degree or post-grad

Do any of the following apply to you?

	No	Yes
I have a paid job (even if in furlough)		
I am part of a community group (or was, pre-Covid)		
I do regular volunteer work (or did, pre-Covid)		
Poor health affects my day-to-day activities		
I have school age children at home		

On a scale of 1-10, how confident are you with reading and writing in English:

1 (extremely difficult)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 (no problems)
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