Benefit claimants & online government services

A paper by the

Digital Equality Group

Foreword

The Government's 2013 Digital Strategy defines 'Digital By Default' to mean 'digital services which are so straightforward and convenient that all those who can use digital services will choose to do so, while those who can't are not excluded'. In the 2017 UK Digital Strategy, the government recognised that it 'must continue to address this digital divide', through the investment of funding and collaboration between the public, private, and third sectors. While the strategies state there should be multiple ways of accessing government services offline, this is not always the case.

This is why WaveLength set up the Digital Equality Group, a policy group campaigning to ensure that people can access government services via both online and offline channels. Many of the DEG's members work with some of the most deprived communities in the UK who are the worst affected by the implementation of the government's digital strategy. In this short paper, we make some recommendations based on evidence gathered from over 20 people on how access to government services can be improved so that more people can use them.

We hope this report will support the growing body of evidence across the UK that Digital By Default services are in many cases not living up to the aspirations of the 2013 strategy. Services are not always straightforward or convenient. Those who can't use digital services continue to be, or are increasingly excluded by the Digital By Default principle. It is up to the DEG, alongside other partners in the sector, to offer practical recommendations for services to improve their digital offers, and for citizens to improve their engagement with government services through a range of channels.

The DEG would like to thank everyone who responded to our survey. We look forward to building up our evidence base and engaging with more partners in the future

Tim Leech
Chair of the Digital Equality Group
WaveLength CEO
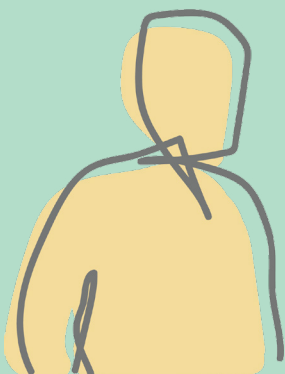
Earlier this year, Mary's husband was made redundant. Despite having poor literacy skills, the Job Centre recommended that he look at 3 websites. Mary's husband finds using a tablet at the best of times is difficult, let alone during a period of severe stress. The advice to essentially "to go home and do everything online" was unhelpful and insensitive.

1 There should always be non-digital options made clearly available in a range of accessible formats to those who need or want them.

Digital services can make it more difficult for vulnerable groups to claim benefits. Where claimants could previously fill in a paper form alongside a support worker, uploading the same information online presents a new set of problems. We share feedback collected from benefit claimants and their support workers below.

Verification: When Bradley forgot his Government Gateway ID and password, he had to wait to receive his new details via the post, which led to a long delay in making his application. Bradley's experiences are not unusual; research by the National Audit Office shows that two-thirds of claimants had been locked out of their account, because they could not verify their identity causing delays.[1]

Space: When asked to fill in details on health conditions and medications, claimants commented how there was insufficient space to include all the necessary information. As a result, people risk losing out on much-needed financial support. In the worst case, when payments are unexpectedly cut off, it can be the difference between life and death.

Progress: Some claimants noted how they could not save their applications as they went along, leaving claimants feeling fatigued and disrepected.

9% of UK citizens remain offline.[2]	Only 30% of benefit claimants are digitally competent.[3]	Only 50% of benefit claimants can make a claim unaided.[4]

Accessibility: While government services are required to meet the accessibility standards outlined in the Service Standard Manual, people with impairments can still find websites and apps difficult to use. Nell, who lives in Sussex and is unable to work, shared her frustrations using her screenreader to access government websites. One website showed a bin icon to represent waste disposal services, which her screen reader could not interpret because it did not have any text associated with it. This meant that she could not interact with the web pages and access the services she required.

These are just some reasons why there should be non-digital ways to access government services. Government services should clearly give phone numbers and addresses so that people who are not comfortable, or able to use online services can engage with them through non-digital channels.

> " PIP applications are a joke. I felt totally disrespected throughout the whole process. "

2 Government should recognise that the 'default' nature of digital services is continuing to exclude people and change its overarching principle from 'Digital by Default' to 'Digital First'.

Even with access to equipment and Internet, both claimants and support wokers struggle to fill in online applications for benefits. This could be due to financial circumstances, literacy levels, or impairment. For example a charity who support isolated men over the age of 55, told us how many of the people they help have poor digital literacy skills; they were not taught digital skills at school, nor did their jobs require them.

> " I have a sister who has a learning difficulty, can't write properly & can't use computers. How is she supposed to manage in a digital welfare system & economy? "

> " I was a lone voice asking what people without access to broadband were supposed to do. They were so excited about the potential & didn't want to answer. An inefficient service does not become efficient through being online. "

> " I spoke to a woman trying to get Universal Credit. She never succeeded as she could not get her husband online at the right time to make a joint claim. People are still donating food, but it is ridiculous that they cannot have a form for it. "

> " It is deliberately made impossible so people don't claim. They underestimate the anger that comes with hunger & having your life made hell by people who would rather you die. "

People should be given a choice as to how they engage with government services, giving dignity and respect to people who do not conform to the 'default' way of accessing services online.

3 The government should provide universal means-tested broadband to those who need it most.

One of the biggest barriers people face when trying to engage with online government services is not having access to the Internet at home. In 2018, Professor Philip Alston, the UN's rapporteur on extreme poverty, stated how people reliant on benefits are less likely to have Internet access at home, concurrently as the government increasingly requires benefit claimants to make online applications.[5]

If people can't access the Internet or technology at home, they are told to visit their local library. This advice is given despite a decline in the number of computers available. Many people with poor literacy skills or learning difficulties, struggle to use them unaided. They are also only able to use a computer for an hour at a time, which is not enough time to fill out an application and upload all the supporting documents (especially when there is no save and continue function).

Government should go further than the Universal Service Obligation, which gives consumers the right to request a decent broadband service, and create a right to Universal Broadband Access. This provision will ensure that <u>everyone</u> has the ability to access Internet services regardless of ability or financial status. The DEG recommends that this should be a means-tested minimum level Internet access offer, financed by Government. If the government increasingly moves services online, then they should invest to ensure that the groups who need it most are able to access the Internet.
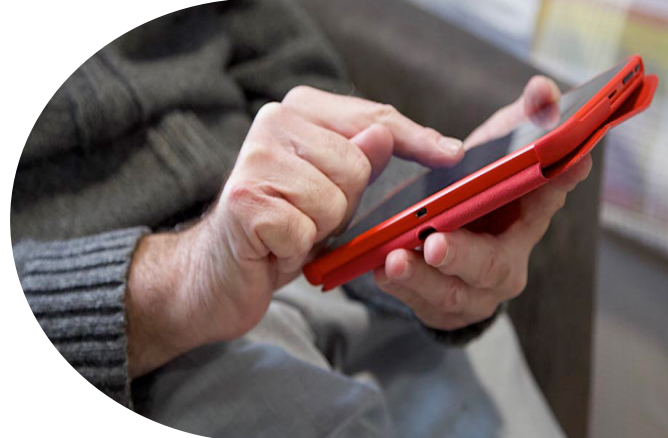
References

1. Denyer-Bewick, Rich. 'Universal Credit — Digital Inclusion's Unruly Party Guest'. Medium, 18 April 2019, https://www.citizensonline.org.uk/universal-credit-unruly-party-guest/

2. Lloyds Bank, 'Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2019', May 2019, https://www.lloydsbank.com/banking-with-us/whats-happening/consumer-digital-index/key-findings.asp

3. Ibid. | **4.** Ibid. | **5.** Alston, Philip. 'Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights', 16 November 2018, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/EOM_GB_16Nov2018.pdf.

Quotes from indiviudals who filled in the DEG questionnaire, or e-mailed the DEG, between July and August 2019.

The Digital Equality Group, co-ordinated by the national loneliness charity WaveLength, is campaigning to ensure that people can access government services via both online and offline channels.

The policy group (whose members include Citizens Online and the Research Institute for Disabled Consumers) wants to ensure that the movement of services online does not marginalise individuals may not choose, or be able to, participate in a digital future.

To find out more, please

Call: 01708 621101

Visit: www.wavelength.org.uk/deg

E-mail: deg@wavelength.org.uk