

the Pensioner

THE MAGAZINE FOR MEMBERS OF THE CIVIL SERVICE PENSIONERS' ALLIANCE

Age-friendly communities:
initiatives that are aiming to
keep older people involved

The Pensions Ombudsman:
a manager explains how you
can benefit from the service

The Lifeboat Fund: the civil
service charity's indispensable
support for lifesaving at sea

Digital divide

What's being done to help older people live in an increasingly online world?

Getting connected

Your life will be lonelier if you're not online, says Jenny Sims - and here's what's being done to help more older people benefit

The Campaign to End Loneliness says there are 1.2 million chronically lonely older people in the UK. It also states that loneliness is bad for people's health, puts them at greater risk of cognitive decline and dementia, and that the number of over-50s experiencing loneliness will reach two million by 2025/26.

According to Age UK, half a million older people go four to five days a week without seeing or speaking to anyone.

Many reports have shown that loneliness and isolation are made worse for people who are not online or who have poor digital skills. To help tackle this, more than 70 UK community organisations have joined the Connect

Up Community of Practice, launched late last year by social change charity the Good Things Foundation (GTF).

GTF, which has been helping people get online since 2009, developed the project with Age UK, Independent Age, Age Friendly Communities and others to share learning and ideas via regular meet-ups and training workshops.

Its first meeting was in December - in time to share plans to help people stay connected over Christmas.

GTF Community Engagement Manager Louise Branch said: "It's been a tough two years, especially for older people who have been most affected by Covid - and who are most likely to be digitally excluded. This means a lot of

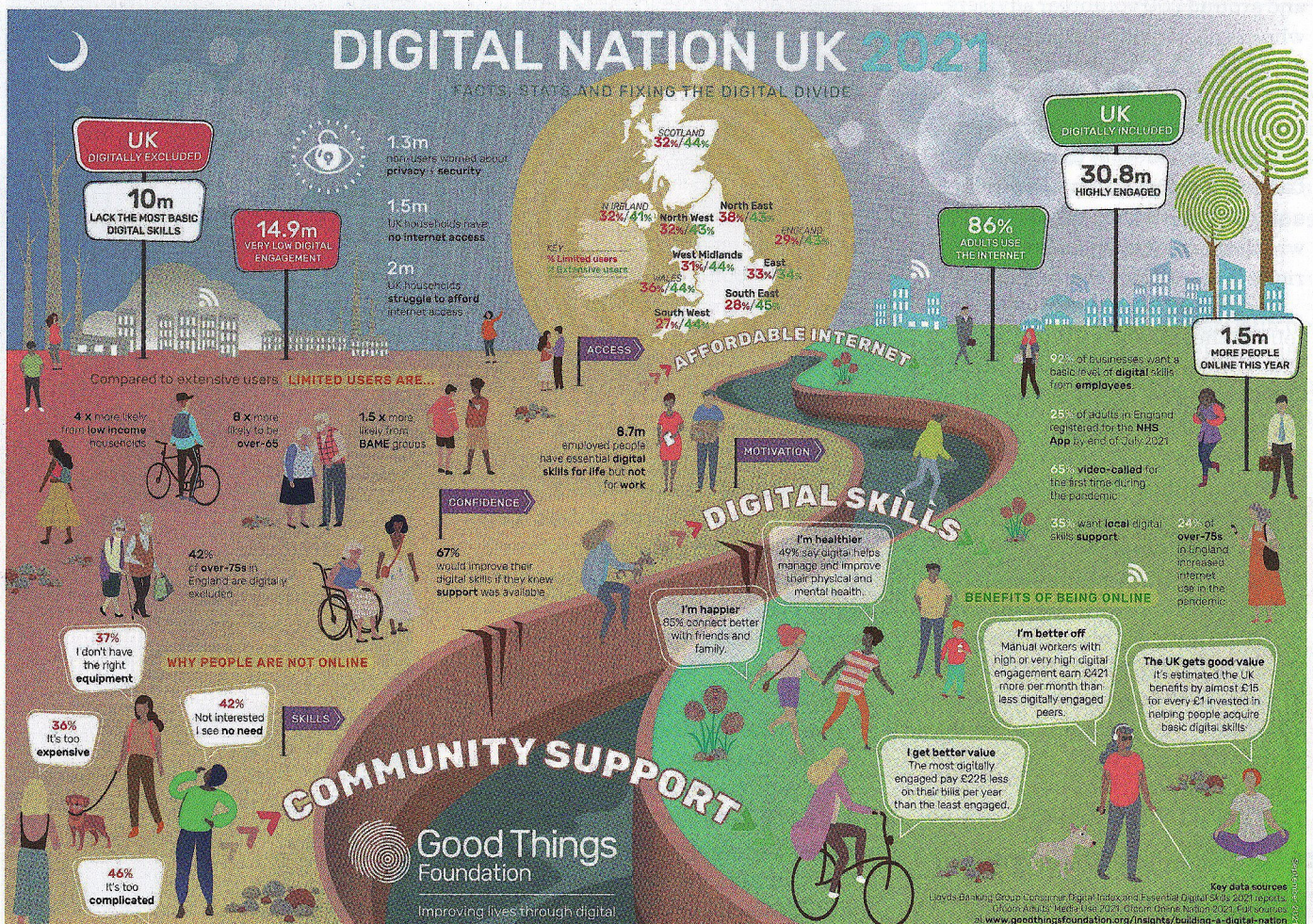
them have been unable to connect with others either in person or virtually."

GTF, which works to "fix the digital divide", is experienced in helping people overcome the various barriers to getting online - lack of confidence, lack of digital skills, fear of scams, affordability and poor connectivity.

With funding from the Scheinberg Relief Fund (set up during Covid to support social benefit projects), GTF and Connect Up partners aim "to equip older people with the digital skills needed to make and maintain meaningful connections with others".

Over Christmas a range of successful connecting up projects included:

- Age UK and other organisations



sharing their tablet loan schemes so that older people could get online over the festive period

- A Zoom Christmas dinner in Leeds so that older people didn't have to spend the day alone
- People learning digital skills through simple tasks and challenges such as taking a picture of their breakfast and sending it to someone online
- Online activities such as festive quizzes and stories read by primary school children
- Sharing live streams of carol concerts and helping people connect to religious services
- Setting up WhatsApp and Facebook groups.

It is hoped these Christmas successes will not only have reduced people's loneliness over the festive period, but given people basic skills and confidence to continue benefiting by going online.

Research into older people's use of and access to the internet and their digital skills shows:

- Eighteen per cent of over-65s have no

Digital inclusion and the right to stay offline are now human rights issues

internet access at home (Ofcom 2021).

- Forty nine per cent of over-75s are limited users of the internet (see infographic), so aren't benefiting fully from the digital world.

Help and training is widely available through GTF's Online Centres Network and other organisations. But all four UK governments' digital strategies state that alternative ways of accessing information and services should always be available for those who cannot or do not wish to go online.

Human rights

But policies alone are not enough. They have to be put into effect, and there is widespread evidence across the UK that digital alternatives are not always being provided by public sector and health services, resulting unequivocally in the digitally excluded being disadvantaged.

Thus, digital inclusion - and the right to choose to stay offline - have become

human rights issues, taken up by Heléna Herklots CBE, the Older People's Commissioner for Wales, Health and Social Care Scotland and many others.

Herklots' role includes holding public bodies to account for any lack of action to protect people's rights, which led her to publish a report on digital inclusion, *Leave no-one behind* in April 2020.

Dissatisfied with the response, she followed this up more than 18 months later by using her legal powers to issue formal guidance to local authorities and health boards in Wales. She set out actions they should be taking so that older people could access information and services "in an increasingly digital world". This, she said, was "crucial to ensure older people's rights are protected and upheld".

The guidance also said support should be provided to help older people get online and use the internet safely and with confidence.

It echoes parts of an Age UK London report, *Mind the Gap: older Londoners and digital use during the pandemic* (July 2021), which called for similar measures. "Alongside taking steps to support older Londoners who would like to use the internet more, local authorities must also ensure that those who cannot (or chose not to) use the internet are not disadvantaged in their access to public services or being an active citizen," it said.

The report called for several things:

- An age-friendly rollout of the new digital skills entitlement
- More social tariffs and genuinely affordable access to the internet for older Londoners on low incomes
- Easier-to-understand broadband contracts
- Boroughs ensuring equal access to information, support and services for older Londoners offline.

It said: "Maintaining phone lines - so those who do not access the internet are still able to access local services and engage actively as citizens - is vital."

And it recommended local authorities map out the extent of digital exclusion and the needs of those who are digitally excluded - has an older person had internet access for their social care needs assessments, for instance.

The National Pensioners Convention (NPC), to which the CSPA is affiliated,

More information

- Good Things Foundation, PO Box 6063, Sheffield, S11 0GU
Email: hello@goodthingsfoundation.org
Website: www.goodthingsfoundation.org

- Centre for Ageing Better, *Covid-19 and the digital divide*: <https://ageing-better.org.uk/digital-inclusion>

- Campaign to end loneliness: www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/the-facts-on-loneliness/

- Age UK London, *Mind the Digital Gap*: www.ageuk.org.uk/london/projects-campaigns/mind-the-digital-gap/

launched its own digital inclusion campaign, *Connections for All*, on Dignity Action Day on 1 February 2021. This included twin aims, like the new Connect Up Community of Practice, to help more older people get online and ensure those who could not or chose not were not disadvantaged or excluded.

As the NPC is not an organisation that offers training, it cannot officially join Connect Up - but it can support it and signpost members to the help being offered, as can the CSPA.

CSPA deputy general secretary David Luxton said: "Addressing the digital divide has become more urgent with the social isolation of the past two years for so many older people, especially those living alone.

"Alongside support to help older people access the internet, more must be done by central government, local authorities, banks and utility firms to offer telephone services and postal communications alongside access to digital online services, so that older people without access to the internet are not left digitally excluded." 📞

- Jenny Sims is a freelance journalist and co-chair of the NUJ's 60+ Council.