

# House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee - Inquiry - Digital Exclusion and the Cost of Living

Submission from Healthwatch Worcestershire - 7<sup>th</sup> March 2023

Inquiry Question:

1. *What are the main causes of digital exclusion in the UK? What is the economic and social impact?*

## A. ABOUT HEALTHWATCH WORCESTERSHIRE

Healthwatch Worcestershire gathers feedback from those who use local health and social care services, people contact us to share their experiences. This helps us to identify issues and concerns, decide what to focus on and tell those who run the services how they can improve.

## B. DIGITAL EXCLUSION

The **NHS Long Term Plan** sets out a vision for a digital transformation enabling people to access health information and services online. Covid-19 accelerated the move towards digitalising health care. This was welcomed by many, and we have received positive feedback from patients about the convenience and time saving this has offered them.

However this digital transformation may not work for everyone, in particular people who experience **health inequalities**, face **digital exclusion** or may find using the internet and remote appointments more difficult.

We collected evidence in November 2021 from 712 people about digital access to health services. We found that digital access was more difficult for

- Older people
- People with a disability, including learning disability, Autism and hearing and visual impairment
- People with long term conditions including Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's, Dementia and those who have experienced a stroke
- People with mental health issues
- People experiencing homelessness
- People on lower incomes
- Those for who English is not their first language

**16%** of respondents told us they **do not use the internet** and many more experienced difficulties using functions on digital devices, such as sending photographs and making video calls. Signing up for NHS / GP surgery digital applications was not easy for some.

Many people would **prefer face-to-face** to digital appointments, saying that **remote appointments lack personal interaction** and make **communication difficult**.

Other issues raised were about the **privacy, confidentiality and security** of accessing services online. Many, (including young people) found it difficult to have a private space to have a conversation via telephone or video call.

Since our Report was published the Herefordshire & Worcestershire Integrated Care Board published a detailed action plan, taking on board our findings and recommendations.

The Action Plan, and our report, is available here:

[Digital Access to Healthcare Report | Healthwatch Worcestershire](#)

## **WHAT NEXT?**

We recognise that increasing access to the internet and providing training and ongoing support to enable people to use the internet and digital device functions will be crucial as more and more social care and NHS information and services become available through digital means.

In planning for a digital future it is important to ensure that those experiencing digital exclusion and health inequalities are not left behind. We would advocate that there should always be accessible, non-digital alternatives for those who are unable or unwilling to use digital services. These should be of equal quality and offer as much benefit to the user as a digital solution.