

[To: DigitalInclusionMailbox@gov.wales](mailto:DigitalInclusionMailbox@gov.wales)

26 November 2024

Llais' response to Digital Inclusion Future policy development

1. Llais welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the digital inclusion future policy.
2. Llais is an independent statutory body, set up by the Welsh Government to give the people of Wales a strong voice in the planning and delivery of their health and social care services – locally, regionally, and nationally.
3. We provide a complaints advocacy service, supporting people to raise a concern or complaint about NHS or social care services. Our trained, dedicated complaints advocacy staff provide free, independent, and confidential assistance.
4. During development of our response, we have involved our staff, our volunteers, and used what we have heard through our engagement activities with people with lived experience of digital exclusion.
5. Our responses to Welsh Government's questions are as follows:

What are your thoughts on existing digital inclusion provision in Wales at a national, regional, or local level?

6. Existing provision is variable dependent on location, there is much higher provision for reliable internet services in more urban areas.
7. Rural or disadvantaged areas often lack the same level of access. This inconsistency means that many of the people we hear from (who may already feel isolated) are still struggling to get the digital help they need.

8. Many feel that there is a lack of awareness raising around what digital inclusion means for people and communities.
9. Regional and local digital inclusion projects and initiatives often differ from one area to another, relying on different sectors and businesses to provide training e.g., banks, housing associations, care providers etc.
10. More needs to be done to ensure that digital inclusion reaches those who need it most, especially in communities where language barriers or health issues are more common.
11. Existing initiatives like Digital Communities Wales have been beneficial but could be more consistent, especially for those most digitally excluded (e.g., elderly, people with disabilities, rural communities).
12. There needs to be more working with trusted community organisations to promote awareness of digital inclusion services to improve access and engagement.

What are the barriers to people being able to access digital inclusion provision?

13. The cost-of-living crisis, including increases in mobile phone and broadband contracts which should be considered a utility, is stopping people being able to access digital inclusion provision.
14. There is a lack of joined up working between services e.g., health and social care, housing, welfare, and social security all of which can have an impact on a person's ability to be digitally included.
15. There is not enough provision for people who are permanently digitally excluded – e.g., those who are unable to use technology or acquire the skills to use digital services either due to a health/medical condition, learning disability or some older people who may not be receptive to being digitally included.

16. For people with poor vision, mobility problems, or cognitive impairments, websites and apps designed for the general population just don't work for them. For some in minority ethnic communities, finding their way around digital services in a second language or a language they're not fully comfortable with adds an extra layer of difficulty.
17. Some people feel embarrassed about lacking digital skills, and this stops them from seeking support. Friendly, community-based learning could reduce this.
18. Limited availability of resources in community languages can make digital services harder to access for diverse groups; offering multilingual support could help.

What is working well? Can you provide examples of best practice?

19. Schemes like **Digital Fridays** (Rhondda Cynon Taff) for people to access help and guidance on using equipment, digital services, and general skill building. This was provided using local community spaces like libraries, which we know are at risk due to budget cuts.
20. **Cynon Taf Community Housing Group** did a digital inclusion project a few years ago, partnering with BT to ensure Universal Credit claimants got basic broadband access for £10 per month allowing them to maintain their claims and meet their claimant agreements and providing tenants with low-cost tablets or low-cost smartphones where required.
21. In Ynys Mon, the primary care team at **Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board** have commissioned a 3rd sector organisation to provide training to use the NHS app for older people in community locations. This has proved very popular.

22. **Digital Communities Wales:** Alongside initiatives such as AbilityNet, these programmes do make a difference by providing practical, hands-on support to those who need it most. For the people we have spoken with who have not had much digital experience, this kind of face-to-face help is essential. Whether it's helping an older person learn to use email or supporting someone with disabilities to access services online, this personalised approach is key.
23. **Tech Donation Programmes:** Initiatives that refurbish and distribute devices to people in need are doing a great job of getting technology into the hands of those who can't afford it. These programmes often work with local groups to make sure people not only get the devices they need but also the training to use them effectively. If these programmes could be expanded, with the support network behind it, then this would make a difference to people.
24. Local partnerships with libraries, care homes, and community centres create comfortable environments for learning digital skills.
25. Expanding “digital mentor” schemes, where people receive ongoing, personalised support from community mentors, could help participants build confidence and sustain engagement.

What would you like to see going forward for digital inclusion policy?

26. **Not everyone wants technology in their lives** for all sorts of reasons. Those who do but can't should not be put at a disadvantage.
27. **Better links between digital service providers and other service providers in different sectors e.g., health and social care, welfare and social security, education, etc.** This will help to gain a better understanding of what the people who are most likely to be digitally excluded want or need.

28. **Subsidised basic technology for those who are at most risk of digital exclusion.** Including the provision of credit agreements with no-interest over the repayment period, with more flexible parameters around repayments and fewer penalties for late repayments. This would enable people to avoid high-interest non-priority lenders where they have poor or no credit scores and break the debt cycle that lower income households can get caught up in.
29. **Free assistive technology** for disabled people to be able to access digital services as fairly as anyone else.
30. **Better digital infrastructure** providing better and more reliable internet access to more rural and coastal communities.
31. **Digital hubs and support**, either new or through utilising existing community service provision to ensure those who need more support with their skills or who may otherwise lack access to digital services/broadband can get the help they need e.g., people experiencing homelessness and provision to provide home-visits where people have restrictions due to health issues or caring responsibilities.
32. **Stronger regulation**, with the private sector to be brought in line with public sector expectations, particularly around Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, ensuring digital inclusion and accessibility is more widely considered as part of decision-making e.g., through Equality Impact Assessments and actual consequences for those who do not do this sufficiently.
33. **Diversity in digital spaces**- e.g., NHS digital leaders. Research has shown that there is still a huge lack of representation within this sector from under-represented groups particularly minority ethnic backgrounds. This not only leads to a lack of diverse thinking and solutions, but also increases the chances of bias being built into technology that is supposed to assist with reducing inequalities e.g., AI, facial recognition software, etc.

34. **Accessibility by design:** Digital services must be made accessible to everyone from the start. This includes improving accessibility features for people with disabilities (like voice-activated tools or easy-read options) and offering services in multiple languages so that minority ethnic communities can fully engage. This approach helps make sure that people from all backgrounds, regardless of their health or language skills, can access the services they need.
35. **Non-digital options:** We can't assume that everyone will want to use digital services. For some people, particularly older adults or those with severe health issues, digital services won't be the right solution. It's essential that we keep traditional methods of accessing services (like phone calls or in-person appointments) available, so that no one is left out.
36. **Health and digital integration:** For those with long-term health conditions, integrating digital support into their health and social care is crucial. By offering digital skills training during health visits or social care appointments, we can make learning about digital technology less daunting and more accessible for those who need it most.
37. **Sustained digital hubs:** Establish permanent digital hubs within communities, run by volunteers or community leaders, for long-term digital support.
38. **Device sharing initiatives:** Create a device-sharing or leasing programme, allowing people to borrow devices to overcome the barrier of high upfront costs.
39. **Digital literacy as a life skill:** Expand digital literacy in schools and youth centres to foster confidence in all young people. For older adults, tailor workshops to focus on practical uses, like banking, healthcare, and social connection.