STATEMENT

BY

THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

TITLE   Digital Inclusion
DATE   29 May 2012
BY   Jane Hutt, Minister for Finance and Leader of the House

People's lives are being transformed by their use of the internet. Searching and applying for jobs, accessing public services, shopping - often with more choice and lower prices than on the high street - online banking, or just keeping in touch with friends and family. The pace at which technology is changing the way our society and economy works is astonishing. So much so that in our modern society, the need to be digitally included is fast becoming a necessity.

Everyone should be able to benefit from using the latest digital technologies.   This is a key social justice and equality issue which cuts across all areas of society, and one which we should all embrace.

Yet in 2010, a third of the Welsh population, around 785,000 people, were not accessing the internet.

Let's be clear what that means for individuals and families in Wales.

They can't apply for jobs that are increasingly only advertised online and require an email application. They can't save money - securing better deals on fuel bills and car insurance, often worth hundreds of pounds a year. They can't get their voice heard. Increasingly the only way to make complaints is through the internet and one of the main ways for individuals to influence Government is via e-petitions.

People who are not accessing the internet can not benefit from the convenience and simplicity of accessing online public services, like renewing their car tax or booking a GP appointment. I am particularly concerned to ensure that digital proposals in the UK Government Welfare Reforms do not result in excluding some of the most disadvantaged people in Wales from these services.

The reasons why people are not digitally included are many and varied. Some don't see it as relevant for them. Some lack the skills and trust to use the technology safely and confidently. Many simply can't afford the equipment and services to be online.

This Government is committed to reducing digital exclusion and the associated risk of increasing social and economic exclusion. Our Digital Inclusion Framework identified that the majority of the digitally excluded in Wales are likely to be older people, the unemployed, residents of social housing, or disabled people. It is therefore logical that our digital inclusion activity is focussed on these groups.

We are working towards our 2015 target to reduce digital exclusion to 25% of the adult population. This means getting an additional two hundred thousand people online compared to 2010. There are already signs that we are making good progress - the most recent (2011) Ofcom take-up figures suggest a 7% decrease in exclusion to 29% since 2010. We will have an accurate picture of progress when the next national survey data comes out in September.

A fully digitally included society has the potential to improve people's lives and the communities they live in. It can create economic opportunities, improve skills and offer more convenient, access to services, including public services.

Putting public services online can be an opportunity to engage more people, simplify services and reduce costs. However, we must recognise that access to online services will continue to represent a challenge for some. These people will need the appropriate support, whether face-to-face, over the phone or through intermediaries, to ensure that those who most need access to services will be able to do so.

Digital exclusion can not be tackled in isolation and needs the support across the public, private and third sectors. The Welsh Government approach is to align policies and plans, and co-ordinate activities towards the common goal of digital inclusion; and to secure buy-in from a wide range of stakeholders across all sectors.

As a Government, we will continue to ensure that our policies, strategies and initiatives - whether it is growth and prosperity, public service delivery, tackling poverty or independent living - align with our vision of a digitally inclusive Wales.

The Government has supported many different and complementary areas of activity that encourage or help people to be online, including Engagement through libraries, learning opportunities and volunteering.

Key to achieving these has been the Communities 2.0 programme. It has helped many thousands of people in some of the most deprived areas of Wales to go on-line and start accessing the benefits and opportunities so many of us take for granted. The programme, which has a further three years to run, has successfully linked with other campaigns and initiatives, like the BBC First Click campaign, BT's 'Get IT together', and 'Digital day', which is part of Adult Learner's Week.

I have visited a number of projects over the last year and each time I have been so impressed by the positive impact the internet can have on people's lives. Whether it is care home residents learning to use skype to keep in touch with family, or somebody buying goods online for the first time – the sense of achievement and confidence they show is remarkable. This can then encourage them to do more online and enjoy even greater benefits.

Just last week on *Digital Day*, as part of *Adult Learners' week,* I visited a project in Blackwood which was helping local housing association tenants - many of which were unemployed – to learn more about how to use the internet, including how to search and apply for jobs online.

Through the Communities 2.0 initiative we have supported a pan-Wales project with Care and Repair Cymru, where case workers assist people to become online in their homes.

Communities 2.0 also recently supported AgeCymru's 'Myfriendsonline Week', which helped older people to make more use of social media.

We also work closely with organisations such as Age Cymru and Disability Wales to increase internet take-up amongst their members, which helps to reduce isolation and assists independent living.

We recognise the opportunities of the digital age to boost the Welsh language by encouraging people to use Welsh in everyday life through new technology and social media. Communities 2.0 activities are delivered in the language of people's choice and they support a number of dedicated Welsh Language initiatives.

The importance of volunteering in tackling digital inclusion is reflected in the joint initiative Communities 2.0 and the Wales Council for Voluntary Action are taking to host a Conference this autumn on 'Volunteering in a Digital Age'.

This as a cross cutting issue which needs to be mainstreamed across organisations in all sectors. The economic potential of more people being online is considerable. In an increasingly digital age, we need to do everything we can so Wales can fully reach its digital potential, while ensuring people are not left behind. Simply put, I see this as a social necessity and an economic opportunity.

<p style="text-align: center; color: red;">Check against delivery</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Embargoed until after Jane Hutt, Minister for Finance and Leader of the House has delivered the statement.</p>