Digital Exclusion in Kingston

January 2021, Superhighways
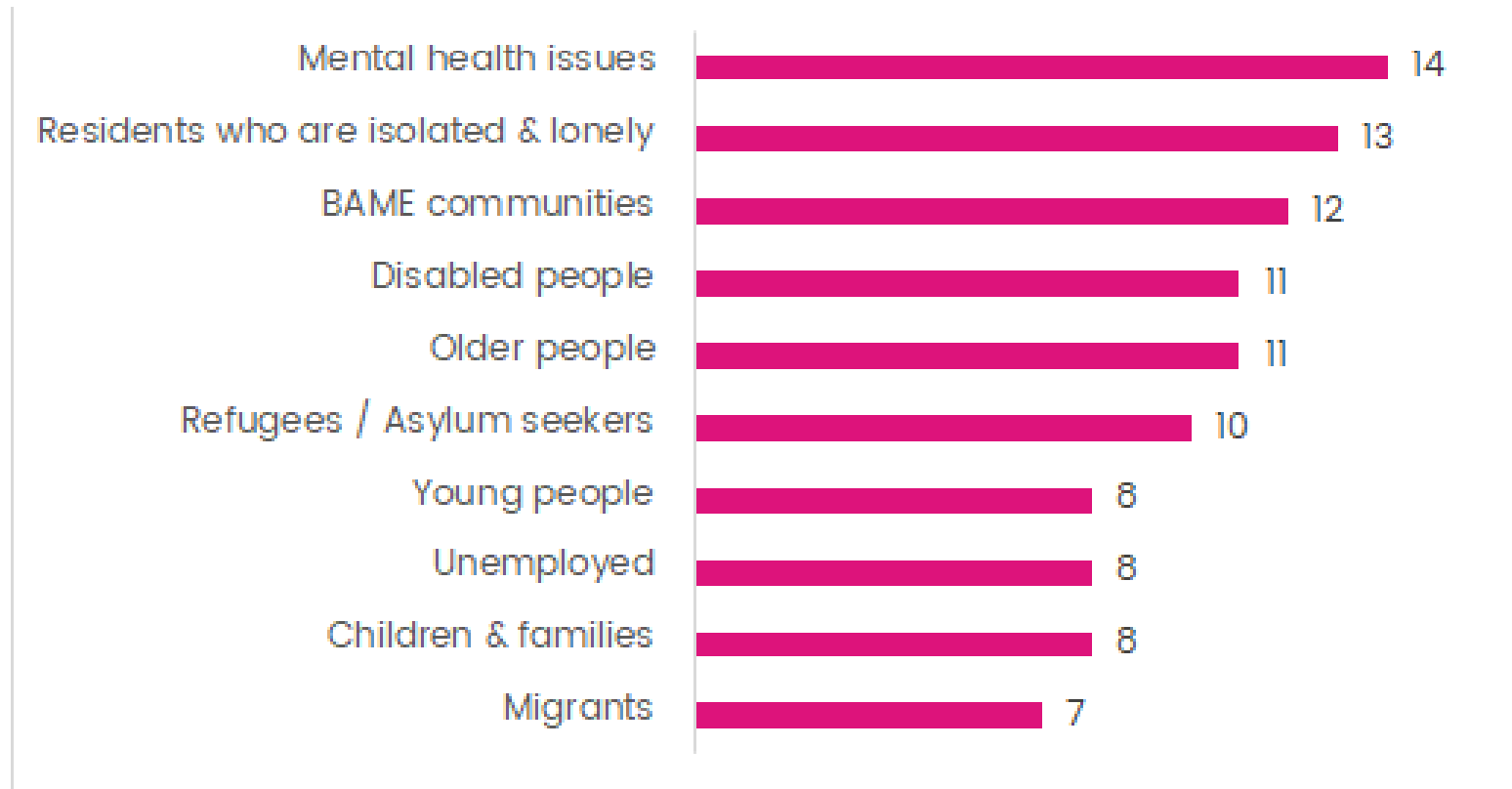
VCS Digital Exclusion Survey, November 2020

Survey Aims:

- To better understand the extent of digital exclusion experienced in the borough

- To highlight its consequences across Kingston's communities

- To provide valuable insight so that solutions developed translate into meaningful outcomes

Kingston's VCSE has unique reach into Kingston's communities, and particularly challenges faced during the pandemic. They are therefore well placed to build a better picture of needs and to help shape solutions and work cross sectorally to reduce the digital divide in Kingston.

24 surveys were completed, of which 21 were from Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations operating within Kingston

Client groups / communities supported as follows:

Client group	Count
Mental health issues	14
Residents who are isolated & lonely	13
BAME communities	12
Disabled people	11
Older people	11
Refugees / Asylum seekers	10
Young people	8
Unemployed	8
Children & families	8
Migrants	7

with Carers, the Homeless, and Adults & Children with Learning Disabilities too

What is digital exclusion?

The majority of responses concerned individuals not having devices, internet access, or digital confidence / basic skills, and as a result, were unable to access online services.

Organisations also cited examples of what specific consequences this has for their beneficiaries and communities. And how Covid-19 has exacerbated this further.

Read on to get a better sense of what digital exclusion means to Kingston residents in 2020…

Isolation, loneliness, cut off from families

In the 21st century digital exclusion = social exclusion

It means that people with a learning Disability and their families can miss out on crucial information that could improve their lives. Digital Exclusion at this time means that people are extremely isolated and are missing friends. This may lead to poor mental health and depression.

With only 10-20% of our service users online and feeling confident in using online services, the majority cannot do things like shop online, either for food or general items.

Their ability to communicate, and be communicated with is limited by a lack of access to things like email or texts. It's much much harder for them to receive updates of information.

They cannot access online services like patient access. They cannot access online appointments via zoom. They cannot use zoom at all. They are completely uninformed about useful services such as the community library.

This was already a big issue. During Covid the issues have been dramatically multiplied. The lack of digital inclusion has severely impacted our service users.

Someone who has limited ability to read and write may struggle to access digital resources as they may require support to use the technology. So they may need support from a service, but are unable to search for information on that service independently, making that service inaccessible to them.

Someone who does not have internet at home who used to go to the library to job search is no longer able to do so, as the libraries are shut due to Covid. As most job opportunities are only advertised digitally, digital exclusion prevents someone job searching when they were able to previously.

The current pandemic has exacerbated the consequences of digital exclusion, as in-person services and activities have been put on hold. Many services and activities will never return in their previous form, and will in future contain at least an element of online / digital provision. This affects access by our clients to statutory services, including health and social care, as well as activities of day-to-day life e.g. shopping, banking, education and social activities.

The disadvantage is massive, and it's difficult to describe the many, many ways it affects them. The main effect is one of being left behind by society.

This is not a level playing field, the more that everyday activities involve some kind of digital engagement, the more excluded people become.

What are people specifically missing out on?

Support currently available

Respondents flagged that there is a lack of appropriate support, with many organisations providing a range of support themselves, as well as working with external partners:

- Devices – organisational loans, sourcing funding / grants to buy equipment for clients including via Tesco, accessing Devices Dot Now via Superhighways, laptops from Kids Connected

- Internet access – paying for client data, previously signposting to local libraries

- Training and support - via VCS support staff (including e.g. for claiming benefits online, Superhighways, libraries

The role of friends and family were mentioned as key – though this has been limited during Lockdown / self isolation periods. Advocating with schools was also specifically mentioned.

We have 21 clients who are vulnerable with a learning disability, autism and /or mental health concern. Of those clients, only 10 have the internet at home and of those only 6 have a computer or tablet available to them. When Superhighways made an offer of clients receiving an integrated tablet, 5 said they would like one and 3 were allocated. That still leaves 12 who are digitally excluded.

We are currently running a very small pilot with 'Sparko TV'
https://sparko.tv however it is too early to say whether this
will be successful. To date we have only been able to
access very limited, short-term support for our client group.

We give individual support to access Zoom for our lessons (both 1:1 support and group). This individual support is very time consuming and has mixed results. We can't see their device (and they're all a bit different) so we aren't always successful.

We are providing the essential skills training to our elderly service users. By acquiring these skills, they are now able to join video meeting, stay physically fit by joining live online exercise classes, surf the internet to find resources and information and most importantly take part in various online activities which help them cope mentally during this unfortunate crisis.

What barriers still exist?

There needs to be a far, far greater focus on creating safe spaces where people can 'play' and experiment with technology.

Many of those digitally excluded are highly intelligent, accomplished people, and this digital exclusion has an impact to make them feel left out, stupid and confused.

Tackling the negative emotions and anxiety that people face when asking for help is the biggest barrier.

Many parents struggle due to lack of confidence and lack of technical ability. They are scared and put off by complicated sites and processes, especially if English is not their first language. They can give up easily as it can be another stress on top their already stressful lives.

There is little or no financial support for adults to get IT equipment.

Some libraries and colleges offer IT courses but often these are at a higher level than our clients can manage (as they have very low levels of English language).

There is IT training available, but generally someone must have a basic level of IT and access to internet to access these opportunities as most opportunities are currently virtual.

What's needed?

Whilst many respondents cited all 4 options as needed, the majority selected 1:1 support as the key enabler for their beneficiaries and communities to become more digitally included.

Offers which would most improve digital inclusion for your client group/community?

Category	Value
Training	2
Internet access / data	3
Devices	5
1:1 support	10
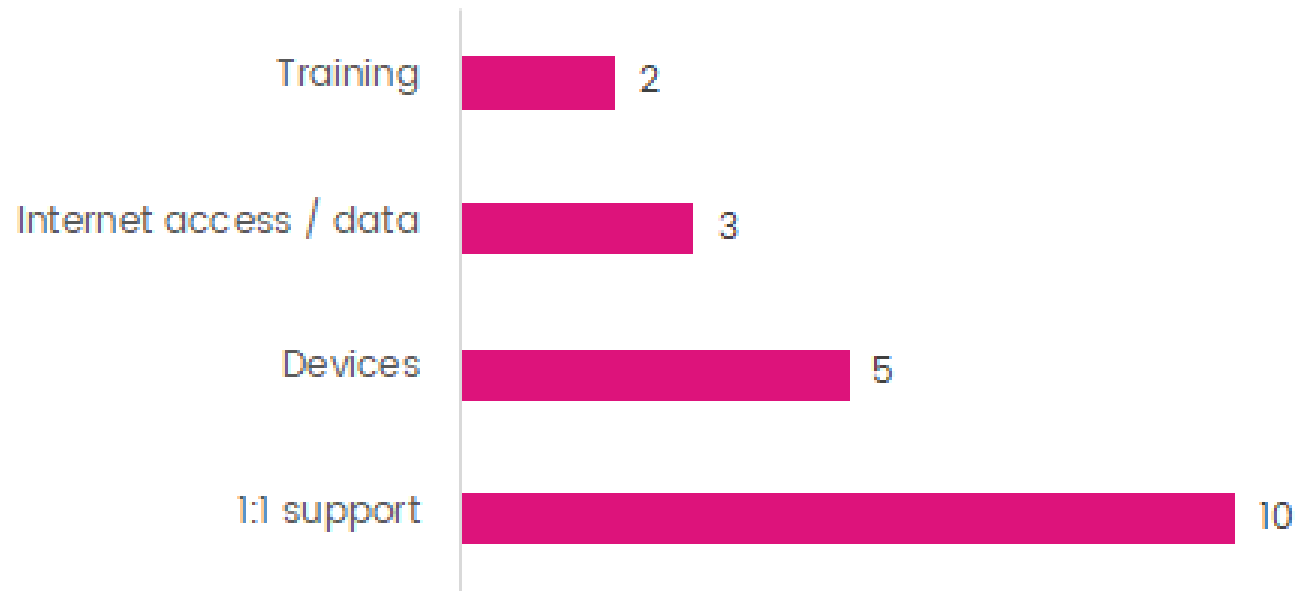
There are few trainers, yet one to one training is often the only way, as everyone will have different issues. Many are not aware that NVDA Voice over, Talkback or even Windows narrator exist. They may be scared by the cost of Jaws or Supernova.

19 organisations saw themselves playing a role in enabling service users / communities to be more digitally included

16 organisations reported their staff and volunteers need help to embed digital support within their programmes / activities for service users / their communities (only 4 saying No)

16 respondents said they'd be interested in joining a network of like-minded organisations tackling digital inclusion in the borough (with a further 7 unsure at this stage)

What's missing?

Suggestions included:

- Funding for schools to provide ICT access
- Universal affordable internet access for all
- Clear understanding of who is digitally excluded
- Volunteers to bring additional capacity
- Sustainability – much of the support is short term and so it's stop / start
- Financial support
- Online safety
- An understanding that not every one should be forced into digital / electronic communication

Next steps…

Quick wins within existing Superhighways resource

Facilitate setting up a Kingston VCS Digital Inclusion Network (mirroring the London network we support alongside HEAR Network)

Schedule regular 1:1 and group sessions for VCSE staff & volunteers to gain confidence and skills to better support residents with digital

Run monthly sessions to support VCS staff & volunteers take meetings and activities online.

Future partnership working in 2021

Explore creation of a Digital Champions / Buddies programme in the borough – providing 1:1 support

Explore relaunch of a borough refurbishment programme providing devices to the community

Link with London-wide work looking at better defining digital exclusion and embedding across all provision

A big thank you to the 24 organisations completing our survey...

- Alfriston Outreach Service
- Alzheimer's Society
- Citizens Advice Kingston
- Home-Start Richmond Kingston and Hounslow
- An individual
- Kingston Carers' Network
- Kingston Churches Action on Homelessness
- Kingston Eco-op
- Kingston Mencap
- Kingston Mencap Carers Group
- Kingston Race and Equalities Council
- Kingston Talking Newspaper & Kingston Association for the Blind

- Kingston WelCare
- Learn English at Home
- Milaap Multicultural Day Centre
- One Norbiton
- Public Health
- RBK
- Refugee Action Kingston
- Staywell
- The Fircroft Trust
- Voices of Hope
- Working Well Trust
- Yorda Adventures