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Written evidence submission to the Communications and Digital Committee
Inquiry into digital exclusion and the cost of living

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Dr Ralitsa Hiteva, University of Sussex
Dr Cian O'Donovan, University College London
Dr Kate Simpson, Imperial College London

We respond to Q4 and Q5 in detail, also addressing Q3. *What are the obstacles to greater digital inclusion? Where is policy intervention likely to have the greatest impact over the next 12 months and 5 years?*
Our responses are informed by ongoing multidisciplinary research as part of the UKRI EPSRC -funded project: "*Environmental impacts of digital technologies for health and wellbeing in the home*".

Summary points

1. Digital exclusion is currently being addressed in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner, particularly for vulnerable groups of users such as social housing residents over the age of 55.
2. There is insufficient coordination between different organisations working with residents in social housing, leading to cost increases for all, including residents.
3. Digital services are creating new complexities which is leading to a **mandate gap** among key stakeholders operating within social housing schemes.
4. This risks creating fractured data and services for organisations and users.
5. **A coordinated, whole-systems approach is needed to evaluate ongoing and future digital transformation initiatives.** This approach will create more opportunities for cost sharing and cost reduction for users, residents and stakeholders involved in the provision of critical digital services in homes.
6. Such an approach could draw valuable lessons for addressing digital exclusion from approaches to addressing fuel poverty.

QUESTION 4: How effective are Government initiatives at addressing digital exclusion? What further action is needed, and what should be done to provide offline access to services?

Digital exclusion is currently being addressed in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner, particularly for vulnerable groups of users such as social housing residents.

- The provision of internet connection to social housing residents is mostly based on their ability to pay and is negotiated by individuals themselves. Instead, they would benefit from collective bargaining and blanket coverage guarantees.
- Digitalisation of critical services varies significantly across different geographic areas and different stakeholders, resulting in decentralised digitalisation. However, decision makers lack data and practical understanding of the infrastructure and governance

underpinning decentralised digitalisation, particularly in the context of concentrated pockets of vulnerability and digital exclusion, such as social housing.

- There is an influx of different types of digital technologies entering social housing schemes (in particular, sheltered schemes which specialise in housing for people over the age of 55), resulting in increasing costs and complexity of training for staff and residents, maintenance, and repair.

There is insufficient coordination between different organisations working with residents in social housing. Digital 'pushes' into the homes of users over the age of 55 are taking place on different fronts, often resulting in different requirements and practices for using digital devices:

- Parallel digitalisation agendas are being driven by health and care providers, such as the NHS, and housing associations, as well as by national policies such as the Digital Switchover 2025 (when old copper analogue telephone lines will be completely replaced with digital ones). This is taking place alongside other digital pushes, such as the smart meter rollout. A lack of coordination between initiatives and organisations is leading in turn to:
    - Failures of interoperability between digital devices and systems (e.g. smart tablets which cannot be paired up with door opening and warden call systems)
    - Duplication in digital devices being given to users
    - A lack of understanding of the different technologies introduced for individuals in their homes.
- These overlapping and interdependent dynamics sustain digital exclusion and often make it worse. They can increase anxiety for staff and residents and increase the cost of digital services for service users.

Research has identified what we call a _mandate gap_ that has opened up between key stakeholders operating within the social housing space and the homes of older residents.

- Social housing, the NHS, care and health providers, local authorities and charities all work individually to address digital exclusion.
- However, a big part of what is needed falls outside the core mandate of all these organisations, and is not considered part of the delivery of digital services or the operation of digital technologies in social housing.

Initiatives to address digital exclusion through a more coordinated or whole-systems approach tend to be outliers rather than the norm.

- Successful coordination pulls together and builds on exchanges of information and resources across different systems and stakeholders to develop cross-systems benefits and solutions, but this type of approach is rare.
- Most initiatives provide incremental changes in some aspects of the service provided, such as the training and introduction of digital champions. Scaled up, incremental changes at different rates by different stakeholders could lead to asymmetries in service provision within housing associations and create new forms of exclusion between schemes and geographic areas – a postcode lottery.

Government initiatives do not specifically identify that a whole-systems approach and cross-stakeholder coordination are vital in addressing digital exclusion. They do not provide incentives to develop a coordinated whole-systems approach at a place-based and national level. This creates significant risks. Service providers need to be mandated to tackle digital exclusion and to coordinate across the sector to provide a whole-systems approach to addressing digital exclusion. Support for such an approach should use a combination of:

- Specific digital exclusion reduction targets and standards, such as mandatory digital strategies and platforms for knowledge exchange and learning;
- Expansion of the mandates of existing organisations and companies, including the NHS, housing associations, broadband providers and digital technology developers (this is developed in more detail in the answer provided to Q5, below);
- The introduction of strategic intermediaries operating across these different stakeholders to support the development of practices and programmes across different systems and work towards the delivery of value for vulnerable users;
- The introduction of specific funding for the development of whole-systems approaches and coordination across different stakeholders in addressing digital exclusion.

QUESTION 5: How well are existing industry initiatives (for example cheaper internet tariffs) addressing digital exclusion? How could they be enhanced?

Cheaper tariffs, often referred to as *social* internet tariffs, in independent living schemes, are still unaffordable for many residents.
- Residents who have installed cheaper broadband tariffs in their private flats often struggle to use digital services because of slow speed and congested bandwidth.
- In some cases, cheaper internet tariffs are incompatible with some of the digital technology requirements and functions needed to provide digital services in residents' homes.

Efforts to address digital exclusion for residents of social housing over the age of 55 will be significantly enhanced if the provision of cheaper internet tariffs in social housing is considered as part of a wider package of digital inclusion services, including:
- Tailoring services to the needs and vulnerabilities of customers, and ensuring the compatibility of embedded digital technologies, such as warden call systems and smart home hubs.
- Carrying out initial assessments of needs **before** broadband connections are commissioned and installed.
- Simple and minimal user interfaces and accessible instructions for use and troubleshooting, which should involve non-digital access (such as paper instructions).
- Continuous support for the use of digital services, rather than one-off introductions.
- Addressing the overlap between anxiety about high energy prices and anxiety about new digital technologies.
- Advice must include clear energy use ratings for devices (such as modems) and recommended practices for energy-efficient use, to address the anxiety associated

with usage and energy-saving practices, which can limit the performance of digital services and create further barriers to creating value for users.

Such an approach would recognise and work to prevent the anxieties, wasted time and additional resources for vulnerable users, their care and health providers, housing associations, friends and families associated with delivering internet services in a piecemeal and 'plug and play' manner.
- 'Plug and play' refers to the unrealistic expectation that any broadband supplier can provide internet to social housing schemes, and that the service can start to generate benefits to residents as soon as it is connected.
- In fact, internet provision in social housing with residents over the age of 55 is unlike any other internet system provision, and it should not be *internet/ connection only*.

In developing such a progressive and innovative approach, the Government and industry should draw on the experience of the energy sector in two areas:
> i) expanding digital providers' responsibilities towards vulnerable customers; and
> ii) requiring a coordinated, whole-systems approach to addressing digital exclusion.
- As part of the current price control regulation for energy (RIIO-2), energy suppliers and distribution network operators in the UK are expected to develop ways to support energy customers and help them to benefit from energy services.
- It is likely that such an approach will also have significant direct and indirect benefits for key stakeholders involved in the provision of critical services for social housing residents over the age of 55, e.g. the NHS, social housing providers and local authorities.
- It will involve requiring broadband providers to work in partnership with key stakeholders in addressing digital exclusion, while building on and developing system efficiencies, as in the case of energy suppliers and distribution network operators and fuel poverty.
- A coordinated whole-systems approach will also create more opportunities for cost sharing and cost reduction for users (residents) and stakeholders involved in the provision of critical services.

About the submission:

Authors:
Dr Ralitsa Hiteva, Senior Research Fellow, Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex;
Dr Cian O'Donovan, Senior Research Fellow, Department of Science and Technology Studies, University College London;
Dr Kate Simpson, Research Associate, Dyson School of Design Engineering, Imperial College London.

research include a warden call system, assistive digital technologies (fall pendants, remote door openers), Bluetooth speakers, tablets with mirror apps, smart watches, and smart plugs.

For further information, please contact:
Dr Ralitsa Hiteva, project Principal Investigator, at r.hiteva@sussex.ac.uk

The authors would be delighted to provide further written or oral evidence to the Committee.