

GOSAD Digital Exclusion Report:

Date, Time and Venue: 18/12/2018

***2.30PM – 5PM GOSAD: RESOURCE CENTRE, FEATHERSTONE TERRACE,
SOUTHALL, UB2 5AL***

1. Background Information

8 Million Adults in the UK are offline. The digital divide in Ealing is widening. GOSAD has supported over 2000 Ealing residents take steps towards inclusive digital programmes since 2009. With the advent of Universal Credit and Ealing Council's 'My Account' digital portal that require almost compulsory participation, has caused untold misery and mayhem within the borough. GOSAD has supported 78 residents avoid homelessness due to digital exclusion and a further 166 digitally excluded individuals have secured employment opportunities.

2. Event Agenda and Aims

GOSAD runs open sessions involving marginalised communities and statutory and other stakeholders through its 'Taking the Fear Out of Community Engagement' approach. The session was supported by GOSAD's multi-lingual facilitators for ease of communication. The round table discussion brought together those that are digitally excluded and key stakeholders to;



1. Really understand how digital exclusion affects common residents through shared case studies and testimonials from users/residents.
2. The impact of digital exclusion on families, communities and whole society.
3. Find workable solutions and way forward with attending service providers, including GOSAD's digital journey for resident.

3. Group Discussions (Issues and Solutions)

55 Ealing residents attended the event and statutory representatives. The following thematic areas were discussed, and opinions given by everyone.

❖ Issues Provided/Discussed

- a) Digital exclusion: Majority of those participating in the discussions face language barrier (English as a Second language) and it just happened that this section of participants felt that they were digitally excluded in the sense that they are unable to or struggle; to use computers (internet, emails, etc), operate connected smart phones and TVs, tablets, etc.
- b) Contributing factors to digital exclusion: Participants were very engaged and dug deeper into discussions and with the support of our multi-lingual facilitators everyone had something to say/contribute to the discussion. Some of the contributing factors to becoming digitally excluded/challenged included; lack of prior training/exposure, language barrier, fear of using digital tools especially the computer (fear of the unknown, fraud risks and hacking), computers seen as a 'new generation' domain, unrecognised/undiagnosed learning disability amongst BMER communities and lack of support, abject poverty and lack of access to digital skills and platforms, etc. A participant pointed out the existence of a new and well-resourced digital skills hub for council staff members with little or no offer for its digitally excluded and marginalised residents. This points out to the council's lack of reality and inability to directly engage with residents to seek genuine solutions to digital exclusion.
- c) Challenges and consequences (Pull and Push factors): One cannot be digitally excluded and feel safe or drawn away from technological trends. Before the advent of online portals to conduct crucial transactions, the choice was there to use other forms of communication such as letters, the telephone (speaking to real people at the end of

the phone line!). The move to digital platforms has been driven by the incumbent's government austerity measures and this phenomenon was touched on during the discussions together with the consequences of such governmental move. Participants were particularly worried and even affected by; Universal Credit (mandatory requirement to conduct everything online from appointments to managing a journal), the fall out from not keeping up to UC requirements leading to sanctions and eventual destitution (homelessness, going hungry, etc), Ealing Council's MyAccount not being user-friendly and the need to use another email account (HP Scanner) to upload documents and not getting support to access and maintain such important digital pathways. Voice activated communication technology also came under a lot of criticism. This is where for example to get connected to the right department when calling the Tax Credit helpline, one must vocalise in English (if you have an accent, you fail and cannot go further) the issue they wish addressed. Majority of the participants pointed out that due to the digital divide between the generations, they are worried about the influence of social media and dangerous video games. The concerns discussed about young people included; online safety, living in a 'virtual bubble' resulting to some young people never leaving the house, dangers of radicalisation through extremist propaganda, online bullying, time wasting impacting on educational attainment levels etc. Several digitally excluded participants raised the issue of stress, depression (mental health) and the fact that they feel unable to commit and complete digital tasks daily (UC, etc). The fact that they 'have to' complete digital tasks – one of the participants who was unable to access support, had a complete mental breakdown and was admitted in hospital! The issue of lacking support and inability to access the internet came up several times and these were linked to lack of financial capabilities. Societal challenges were discussed in the context of intergeneration differences – where young people with technological nous lacked the impetus to support their parents/guardians manage their digital responsibilities. Last but not least the need to support those (digitally excluded) that have disability, the elderly and even those with long term illness and are bed ridden – feel furthest from joining in confidence the digital revolution.

- d) Personal perceptions and feeling hopelessness: Some discussions demonstrated feelings from participants of being left behind by a fast-moving world that is on a

technological trajectory. This theme is quite important to mention as the sentiment that came across was that – everything is moving online/digitally (universal credit, council portals, etc). Majority of the participants (those facing digital challenges/exclusion) expressed hopelessness and discussions touched on the fact that the government including the council show little or no interest at all in encouraging and providing digital skills solutions to those on the margins on society.

Example by a client who despite not having an email account was ushered to use the council's public computers to upload documents. The participants assumed the two council attendees would help him with the process but instead he was left on his devices. He eventually got assistance from GOSAD after being referred by the Job Centre with 2 days to spare before submission date.



❖ **Solutions Provided/Discussed**

Group participants continued to share good ideas and without any order, the following solutions/recommendations were provided/discussed;

- a) A joined-up approach to tackle digital exclusion led by the council, government (especially Job centre Pluses) and civil societies. The council needs to engage with those currently struggling to access their digital service and the general public in meaningful way. Meaningful in the sense that so far, the council has failed to calibrate its roll out of the MyAccount portal and support that could have been available to residents. More needs done by the council, civil societies, churches, mosques, schools and colleges to provide; a comprehensive mapping of digital exclusion, basic digital skills support to carry our digital transactions.
- b) For the council and government to rethink of redesigning current digital portals (i.e. UC and MyAccount) through a co-designing methodology with end users especially those that are digitally excluded.
- c) There should be more resources and funding to offer facilities (i.e. mobile digital access, civil society digital hubs, etc) and support for digitally excluded users at convenient locations through a limitless timing basis (i.e. weekends, evenings, even 24hrs). There was a suggestion for the council and the government to offer free internet access to poor families as well as devices such as affordable or discounted tablets, laptops, etc.

Further suggestions for the council and civil society organisations to work with businesses and offer reconditioned and recycled computers, laptops, etc. The council should put more effort in re-establishing the libraries with more resources and funding for digital support for residents.



- d) The need to understand combine English learning with digital skills for those faced with language challenges.
- e) The need to run tester and fun digital sessions for all sections of the community regardless of disability or personal limitations. A yearly digital fair was suggested as a great way of involving whole communities. Further suggestion was to create a time-bank type of drive and encourage digitally astute residents including young people and children to be trained as volunteers – giving their time and knowledge to the digitally excluded.