

Connecting people: tackling exclusion?
An examination of the impact on and use of
the Internet by socially excluded groups in London



November 2003

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Prepared by IECRC and Citizens Online for the Greater
London Authority, London Development Agency,
LondonConnects, and BT.

Paul Foley, Ximena Alfonso, Karl Brown and John Fisher



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This research study and its recommendations present the views of the authors. It's findings and recommendations do not necessarily represent the views of the Mayor of London or any of the other funding organisations.

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foreword by the Mayor of London

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this study of the so called 'digital divide' in London. The study itself is a good example of partnership working across public and private sector and I want to thank the study's co-sponsors, BT, LondonConnects and the LDA, for their support. I also want to thank staff from other organisations who helped frame the research and steer the study. These included Brixton On-line, London Voluntary Services Council, LB of Bromley and the London Older People's Strategies Group, as well as many GLA officers. On behalf of the researchers I would like to thank the Londoners who gave up their time to participate in the study's focus groups.

This study begins to demonstrate that there are real and tangible benefits to being on-line, even among low income or otherwise excluded Londoners. It therefore gives us a much firmer base on which to develop policy. The study makes it clear that being on-line offers all sorts of benefits, but for every individual the mix of benefits is different. At the same time it shows that these benefits – from feelings of being more in touch to cash savings on international calls through the use of email – are individually quite small. It is the fact that the technology contributes in so many different areas, from education to searching for work, to engaging with a local group, that makes it so difficult to tease out where its contribution is real and where it remains a matter of hype.

Qualitative research can highlight compelling stories. Three retired men turned up at a UK On-line centre, happy to admit they knew nothing about computers and keen to learn. The centre manager discovered within five minutes that each of them was illiterate. Their desire for computer training masked a need for basic literacy skills.

The authors of this study make a series of recommendations for improvements to programmes that aim to tackle digital exclusion in London. I will be bringing these to the attention of the main statutory agencies. In particular I will be asking the London Skills Commission to make sure their work takes into account the need for coherent ICT training that will help people into the labour market and provide the wider social benefits this study highlights.

I am also publishing today a statistical analysis 'Londoners on-line' that shows that among the wealthiest households in London being on-line is now almost as common as having a T.V. or telephone. At the other end of the scale low-income households show interest in getting connected at home, believing it gives clear advantages, but cannot afford to do so. Although Government action has ensured that no one should be more than five miles from a free public internet access point, and probably



much closer in London, this does not give the advantages that home connection provides to the better off. We must begin to think about ways to redress this.

I hope this report's recommendations can be a spur to action.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken Livingstone". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ken Livingstone
Mayor of London

a response from BT

"... there are real and tangible benefits to being on-line, even among low income or otherwise excluded Londoners."

Ken Livingstone

We in BT are delighted to welcome this report on London's so-called 'Digital Divide', and to be given this opportunity to share some thoughts on how it can be overcome - and why it must.

London, it goes without saying, is a true world city. Sheer geography makes it one of the world's financial Big Three; history makes it probably the world's most widely-recognised city landscape; but it is London's people who make it what it is today - the world's most vibrant melting pot, where an endearingly resilient culture of fair play lets people from pretty much every culture on earth rub along and share their space and take their turn in the bus queue with quite astounding equanimity. And yet ...

How many Londoners really make the most of what London has to offer? How many, are in reality living only part of the life they could? As all Londoners know, you can live here year after year while knowing little or nothing beyond a small circle of friends and workmates that could, in truth, be anywhere. But if London is to become a truly integrated, healthy and holistic 'whole', a larger vision and broader communication have key roles to play. Which is where, we feel, broadband has so much to offer.

We are committed to getting all of London on broadband. Why? Simply, because we see the broadband experience as crucial to enabling the London experience of the 21st Century.

We want Londoners to have access to information that empowers, to experiences that entertain, to resources that educate, to neighbours, friends and complete strangers who can introduce them to new and different and more enriching ways to live. Nor is this just high-flown abstraction. When parents can find out about schools for their kids - and evening classes for themselves - that's empowerment. When people in boring jobs can find interesting ones, that's liberation. And when people can communicate with others - to learn, to play, to share ideas, knowledge and perspectives - that's the kind of catalyst that helps turn groups of people into true communities.

We at BT believe in London, and we believe in broadband, where you want it, when you need it. We believe it is not just a line; it is liberation.



Liberation through access. Access to new experiences. Access to new interactive services. Access to information, inspiration, communication – in fact to all the things that help us make the most of our lives and share our lives with others.

The London experience of the 21st Century is taking shape right now. Awareness of broadband's benefits, and the training and education to capitalise on them fully, have a central role to play in moulding that shape, defining that experience. We at BT are proud to stand alongside the Mayor – and Londoners themselves – in helping everyone make the most of what we believe is the most vibrant, most exciting, most invigorating city in the world.

A handwritten signature in grey ink that reads "Clive Ansell".

Clive Ansell
BT, Director, London

executive summary

Introduction

This research project investigates the impact and use of the Internet by socially excluded groups in London. The study builds upon the previous work (*Digital Divide in a World City*) completed by IECRC and Citizens Online which found that many studies of Internet use had not adopted an overly critical perspective in evaluating the benefits of ICT by socially excluded groups. The presumption that Internet use by socially excluded groups is beneficial, without any real attempt to understand the relationship between users and ICT is widespread. This presumption is frequently fostered and maintained by the policy push from governments to encourage the adoption and use of ICT. This study therefore:–

- Investigates the factors that influence the adoption and use of the Internet by socially excluded groups.
- Identifies tangible economic and social benefits arising from having access and making use of the Internet.
- Recommends policies and future action concerning the targeting of resources and the design and likely success of current interventions.
- Identifies avenues for future research.

Although this study focuses on socially excluded groups in London the results and recommendations will to be pertinent to policymakers, academics and those encouraging Internet use amongst socially excluded groups anywhere in the UK.

Context

Government has set a target of ensuring access to the Internet ‘for everyone who wants it by 2005’. More than £6 billion will be invested in ICT over the coming years and the Prime Minister declared that ‘digital transformation cannot be restricted to the few, our success depends on extending it to the many’.

Historical precedent suggests that expansion of telecommunications infrastructure focuses on the development of the most lucrative markets, thus excluding people and places that are least profitable. Others argue that Internet content providers focus on the development of commercial sites for more affluent members of society.

Little research has been undertaken that examines access and use of ICTs by the wide variety of socially excluded groups that exist in the UK. Previous research has rarely examined whether access to ICT helps to overcome social exclusion, or conversely, whether a lack of access to ICT increases disadvantage and exclusion.



If ICT policies are to address social exclusion effectively much more needs to be understood about the role of ICT in the lives of socially excluded individuals and communities. This study investigates many of these important issues and provides a better understanding of the role of ICT in the lives of socially excluded groups.

The study

This study is one of the first to investigate the take-up and impact of ICT amongst socially excluded groups. 130 people took part in 20 focus group discussions. Confidential access to the GLA's 2002 London Household Survey enabled the selection of focus group participants on the basis of:-

- Use of the Internet
- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Disability
- Income
- Employment status
- Presence in the household of children.



One element that enhanced the success of the project was the selection of suitable venues and times for focus group meetings. Neutral venues, acceptable to local people, generally not in public sector premises, were selected and sessions took place at various times throughout the day. This ensured the maximum variety of participants were able to attend. Another important component of the project was to examine the impact of current policies to address the digital divide. Recent and longstanding users of public access points and online centres were therefore selected for the project.

Focus group participants were also asked to complete a single page questionnaire. The questions were designed to mirror those asked about Internet use and non-use in the Office for National Statistics Internet access surveys. This enabled comparison of the socially excluded participants in this survey with the UK population.

One focus group session, towards the end of the project, was held with public access point and online centre managers. This session ensured that the results we were obtaining, and our interpretation of them, was in line with the experiences of those assisting socially excluded groups.

The study was founded on a research framework that reflects the way socially excluded groups consider and use the Internet. The Internet

adoption framework is also a useful way for policymakers to consider intervention at each stage of the adoption process.



Key findings and analysis

Chapters in this report investigate issues and results for each of the five stages of the Internet adoption framework. Key findings are shown for each stage in the remainder of this executive summary.

ICT Awareness

ONS reports suggest a considerable lack of interest in the Internet amongst non-users. This study found a high level of curiosity amongst nearly all socially excluded users before they started to use the Internet. This relatively high level of curiosity is matched by the sense of achievement when some of the basic skills have been acquired and confidence in Internet use increases. This sense of achievement and satisfaction appears to increase with age or degree of social exclusion. Policymakers should do more to promote curiosity and provide 'Try IT' events.

The route to obtaining home Internet access was often a two stage process. The first stage was the decision to try the Internet at a public access point, in a community group or other location. This initial 'trial' period often lasted several months. Only 26 per cent of participants using the Internet for less than twelve months had access from home.

The second stage was the decision to purchase a computer for use at home, this was generally taken by socially excluded groups several months after first trying the Internet. This decision appears to be made on predominantly economic grounds. At this point curiosity is less of an influence and better understanding of the benefits of Internet use and the real costs of getting online are more important. Many non-users estimated the costs of purchasing computing equipment and the expenses incurred for Internet access to be more than twice the real cost incurred by the new socially excluded Internet users in this study. There is



an important role to be played by policymakers, IT and ISP providers and public access points to play in clarifying the real cost of computing equipment and Internet access.

ICT Access

Use of online centres and public access points by socially excluded groups is high, even amongst those that had home Internet access. There are probably two key reasons for this. The first is probably a desire to minimise access costs. The second is the low level of Internet access at work provided to socially excluded groups. Only six per cent had Internet access at work compared with 38 per cent for all UK Internet users found by an ONS study. Initiatives to encourage employers to broaden access to the Internet and ICT training in the workplace should be encouraged, particularly in localities or amongst firms that have a high proportion of socially excluded workers



This study has shown that online centres play a very important role in assisting socially excluded groups to get online. Whilst 'small is beautiful' and 'local is beneficial' a lack of scale or size has left some online centres with too few resources to develop their activities more fully or even to provide their current services at the level that users require. Alliances might be beneficial and it is recommended a resource centre to enhance and support the development of online centres and public access points in London should be developed. The Centre should provide shared access to resources such as staff training, mentoring, equipment and the development of an information and good practice exchange programme. As a first step towards identifying what a resource centre might provide a London-wide conference should be organised to share the results of this study and to develop new approaches to encouraging Internet use amongst socially excluded groups.

Skills and training

Many participants expressed the need to have a 'helping hand' to assist them when they encountered problems using the Internet. By definition many socially excluded groups, particularly the elderly, do not have access to a wide range of friends or other support to overcome computing problems. Current solutions to this problem usually focus on assistance provided at online centres. It would be useful to provide this type of general help and support for socially excluded groups through community groups, online and over the telephone.

If established a Public Access Resource Centre should act as a focus or signpost to provide telephone and online information for socially excluded groups about:-

- The location of public access and online centres.
- How to overcome computing and Internet problems.
- Times and locations for ICT training and skills development courses.

Many participants complained about the bewildering array of Internet training and skills development courses offered by ICT centres and learning centres. A Public Access Resource Centre could play a valuable role in collecting information about ICT courses and categorising and presenting them in a common, more easily understood format.

A large proportion of the research for this project focused on formal mechanisms to develop Internet skills. However, discussions identified that many new socially excluded Internet users are keen to volunteer and to assist others start using the Internet. There appear to be opportunities for the development of informal Internet support groups by community associations or neighbourhood groups. Neighbourhood support has the advantage of understanding local needs and providing role models to demonstrate the advantages of ICT.

Participants and online centre managers highlighted that people are often relaxed about saying they cannot use ICT, but they are less happy at stating they lack basic literacy skills. For some participants, particularly those with poor basic literacy skills, using the Internet and developing computing skills was a stimulus to start learning again or improving literacy. Several managers felt this opportunity was often not given enough recognition. Considerable additional benefits in promoting literacy and skills development and perhaps economies of scale will arise from closer liaison and/or co-location of online centres with neighbourhood learning centres.

ICT Use

Email use amongst the socially excluded participants (89 per cent used email) in this study was higher than the level found in an ONS study of all UK users (72 per cent). Email was valued as a quick and cheap method of communication. Email provided the ability to stay in touch with friends and family in the UK and overseas at a fraction of the cost required to communicate by telephone. This was particularly important to racial or ethnic groups with strong overseas ties. For elderly and disabled groups email was particularly useful for reducing feelings of isolation, it also enhanced their ability to participate more widely in society.



The socially excluded participants in this study make far higher use of the Internet than the UK population for all information seeking and online interactive activities, except those that require monetary transactions (i.e. shopping and banking). The topic most frequently investigated by the users in this study was training and educational information. Use of this information was considerably higher by socially excluded Internet users (63 per cent) than by the UK population (ONS study 40 per cent). The second most popular topic investigated by the users in this study was healthcare information, 51 per cent of socially excluded users required this information. This information was particularly useful to the elderly and disabled groups. The ONS collect statistics about 14 online activities but regrettably healthcare is not investigated.

A methodology was developed in this study to investigate how the use of the Internet by socially excluded participants compares with the information requirements of socially excluded non-users. Using this method it was evident that higher than expected use was made of online information about all topics except one. This one exception was benefits information, this was sought by 36 per cent of Internet non-users in the last year, but it was only accessed on the Internet by 23 per cent of users in the last year. Poor levels of use confirm the views of focus group participants that there is considerable scope for improvement in online benefits systems, they are perceived as difficult and unfriendly to use.

Use of government web sites was higher amongst the socially excluded groups in this study (42 per cent) than amongst the UK population (17 per cent). But our methodology to investigate the real level of use of information relevant to socially excluded groups found that online information provided the second lowest added utility (after benefits information) for all of the topics investigated. Whilst levels of use appear to be high Internet access has not increased the level of use of government information to the same extent as other topics investigated.

The topics with the highest added utility (or standardised level of use) are job opportunities information (sought by 1 per cent of Internet non-users in the last year; and accessed by 41 per cent of Internet users), training and education information (sought by 29 per cent of non-users, accessed by 63 per cent of users) and healthcare information (sought by 21 per cent of non-users, accessed by 51 per cent of users).

ICT Impact

This study has shown that Internet access can enhance participation and reduce isolation. Access to information can also provide an entrée to wider opportunities. These benefits should help to overcome some aspect of



social exclusion. However, the limited scope of this study makes it impossible to know if benefits derived from Internet use only help at the margins or whether they might be effective in addressing some of the core issues associated with social exclusion.

The easiest method to investigate the impact or value of the Internet to socially excluded users was to ask whether or not they felt it was 'worth it'. The average cost new users pay for Internet access in their first year was £143. It appears that this investment or the benefit derived from Internet access must have been worthwhile because in later years new Internet users are willing to spend more for better online access or to be able to spend more time online. Indeed, there was a consensus in nearly all focus group sessions that the costs of using the Internet were almost completely outweighed by the advantages of being able to get the information they wanted.



A simple method of analysing the monetary costs and savings of the Internet for socially excluded groups was developed in the research. Average Internet access costs were £165 a year. The average saving on online shopping and communication was £169. The Internet had a net benefit or credit of £4 a year. Participants that had been using the Internet for four years or more estimated that they saved on average £268 per year.

Further research and implications

Research investigating the relationship between Internet use and social exclusion is complex. Rekindling a desire to learn exemplifies one of the wider opportunities stimulated by using the Internet. Trying to investigate the extent and nature of this impact epitomises the difficulties of assessing whether Internet access only helps at the margins or whether in combination with other initiatives it might be effective in addressing some of the core issues associated with social exclusion.

Nonetheless this research project has shown that some clear and quantifiable benefits can arise from Internet access by socially excluded groups. If the level of use of online information is used as a surrogate for beneficial impact amongst socially excluded groups it is apparent that the Internet is not just providing wider opportunities; these opportunities are actively being seized by socially excluded groups. Access to most types of information by the socially excluded Internet users in this study exceeds the level observed by the ONS in national studies.

News and information sought by socially excluded users was predominantly national or international. Local online information was

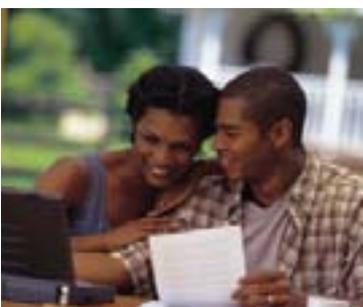
generally regarded as poor. If the Internet is a conduit to overcoming social exclusion it is probable that information about local and national opportunities and initiatives will be required. At present the provision of local information is perceived as being poor in many areas. Local and regional government organisations will have to address the poor perception of local news and information web sites if they are to enhance levels of access to local information online.

Interventions designed to address the digital divide can be sub-divided into two main groups. There are initiatives or policies that:–

- Aim to provide equality of opportunity
- Seek to address the causes of social exclusion

The first group of initiatives aim to provide equality of Internet access (and eGovernment) services to socially excluded groups. Such initiatives are laudable but will not by themselves change very much. The second group of Internet oriented policies are more ambitious; at the outset these policies aim to overcome the causes of social exclusion. They address the reasons for social exclusion and provide targeted groups or individuals with the opportunity through the Internet or the use of ICT to participate more effectively in economic and social activities. The best examples of this type of policy are initiatives that provide training and skills development to enhance computing skills (or overcome basic literacy deficiencies) and enable socially excluded groups to find employment.

Many definitions of social exclusion highlight non-participation in economic and social activities, isolation and a perceived lack of opportunity. This study has shown that a lack of participation or isolation or lack of opportunity can be exacerbated for many socially excluded groups through a lack of access to ICTs and the Internet. Whilst lack of access to ICT is not the cause of social exclusion, it has the potential to further exclude individuals and groups. This view was perfectly expressed by one relatively unimpressed socially excluded Internet user who stated “There is no huge benefit if you learn how to use computers and the Internet. However, if you don’t learn you are behind socially.”



1 introduction

IECRC and Citizens Online were commissioned by the London Development Agency, Greater London Authority, LondonConnects, and BT in December 2002 to investigate the use of the Internet by socially excluded groups in London.

This study builds upon the client and contractor's preceding study on the Digital Divide in a World City. This previous research found that many studies of Internet use by socially excluded groups had not adopted an overly critical perspective in evaluating the benefits of ICT. The presumption that Internet use by socially excluded groups is beneficial, without any real attempt to understand the relationship between users and ICT, is an inherent failing in much of the preceding literature. This presumption is fostered and maintained by the policy push from governments to encourage the adoption and use of ICT.

The primary objectives of this study are to:-

- Study the factors that influence the adoption and use of the Internet by socially excluded groups.
- Identify any tangible economic or social benefits arising from having access and making use of the Internet.
- Identify policy areas or future action concerning the targeting of resources and the design and likely success of current interventions.
- Identify avenues for future research.

To prevent repetition the terms Internet and information and communications technologies (ICTs) are used interchangeably throughout this report. Discussions with socially excluded groups primarily focused on Internet use. However, the definition of ICT used throughout this report includes the use of Internet enabled devices such as PCs, mobile telephones, interactive digital TV, PDAs (personal digital assistants) and games machines (such as the Sony PlayStation 2 or the Microsoft xBox).

The first chapter of this report examines the relevance of the notion of the digital divide and the characteristics of Internet use amongst socially excluded groups.

The second chapter examines our approach to the research and the way it complements and develops existing studies. Twenty focus group discussions were held with ICT users, non-users and those managing public access and ICT training initiatives.

The next five chapters use the innovative policy intervention framework developed in the Digital Divide in World City. These chapters examine



socially excluded groups' awareness of the Internet, the utilisation of access and skills and training initiatives. They also examine how socially excluded groups use ICT and the impact the Internet has on their lives.

The final chapter provides an overview of the key findings, policy recommendations and further research activities required to address the digital divide in London.

2 background: social exclusion and the digital divide

2.1 Introduction

The phrase 'digital divide' is frequently mentioned by policymakers and in the media. It refers to the disparity between those who have use of and access to information and communications technologies (ICT) and those who do not. At present in the UK only 45 per cent of the population have household access and 62 per cent of adults have accessed the Internet in the last year (*ONS, 2003*).



2.2 The digital divide

There is vigorous debate about the nature and magnitude of a 'digital divide'. Some commentators point out that 'divides' are apparent for many technologies, most notably that eight per cent of UK households do not have a fixed telephone line (*Oftel, 2002*) and in some housing estates fewer than 30 per cent have a telephone (*Speak and Graham, 2000*). Nonetheless, many commentators regard a digital divide as significant because a lack of access to ICTs can reinforce disadvantage at a number of levels. For the community, some argue it can limit access and use of better quality services and reduce social cohesion (*PAT 15, 2000*). For adults, computer literacy can be important for re-entering the labour market (*Devins et al, 2003*) and for children it can limit educational learning and attainment (*Becta, 2002*).

Some commentators (*Cowles, Kindya and Rendall, 2001; Keller, 2001*) have added an extra dimension to this definition by asserting that it should focus on the effective use of ICT for social and economic development and not simply access and 'use'.

The case for policy intervention is usually based on the historical precedent that emphasis in the development of telecommunications infrastructure has usually been placed on the development of the most lucrative markets, thus excluding people and places that are less profitable (*Graham and Marvin, 1994*). Others argue that Internet content providers focus on the development of commercial sites for the affluent members of society (*Golding and Murdoch, 2001*). Although the cost of technology is decreasing it is argued that market mechanisms are insufficient to overcome the digital divide and policy intervention is required to reduce the widening gap (*Devins et al, 2003*).

2.3 ICT and social exclusion

A digital divide exists, but it is not as simple as haves and have nots. There will always be a divide between high, medium, low and non-users. Disadvantaged users always have to play catch up in obtaining access and advantaged users will always leave them behind, gaining higher levels of skills and adopting newer technologies and services. Disadvantaged or socially excluded groups are often prevalent amongst those that lie at the non-users end of the digital divide continuum.

The Social Exclusion Unit's 'National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal' (2000) proposed a strategy based on four key principles to reverse decline in deprived neighbourhoods. The first principle focused on reviving local economies and one of the key ideas to help people to compete for jobs was improvement in the use of the Internet in deprived neighbourhoods. Many commentators (*Katz and Aspenden, 1997; Sorenson, 2001; European Information Services, 2001; Ishaq, 2001; Kenyon, 2002; Ramrayka, 2002*) have suggested ICT could also contribute to the other three principles of the Social Exclusion Unit's strategy – reviving communities, providing decent services and partnership working.

2.4 Social exclusion

Social exclusion is a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.

Social exclusion is a politically contentious concept. It is multi-dimensional and not simply related to income. Research has revealed a wide range of causes of social exclusion, both social and spatial. Geographical concentrations of disadvantage result from a combination of macro-structural and micro-local factors operating through labour, land and property markets.

Christie and Perry (1997) suggested that the characteristics of social exclusion, such as non-participation in economic and social activities, isolation and a perceived lack of opportunity can be exacerbated through a lack of information and communication. Whilst lack of access to ICT is not the cause of social exclusion, it has the potential to exclude individuals and groups (*Phipps, 2000*). However, Gibbs (2001) notes that the economic and social implications of ICT are complex and frequently contradictory.



Little research has been found that examines whether ICT helps to overcome social exclusion. Few studies investigate whether ICT can help at the margins or whether, in combination with other initiatives, it is beneficial in addressing the problems of social exclusion.

Despite this lack of information the December 2000 SOCTIM survey of local government IT professionals found that 47 per cent of respondents felt that ICT could address problems of social exclusion by making services easier to use and access, and in assisting the process of lifelong learning. The Wired Up Communities Programme had a similar wide range of objectives to enhance social inclusion. Objectives of the programme included access to government services, support for learning, improvement in employment prospects and social cohesion.

The Beacon Council Scheme, which aims to encourage and share good practice by councils, has two initiatives devoted to encouraging online access to services and social inclusion through technology. Despite little supporting evidence there appears to be an increasingly accepted viewpoint that ICT has role to play in addressing social exclusion.

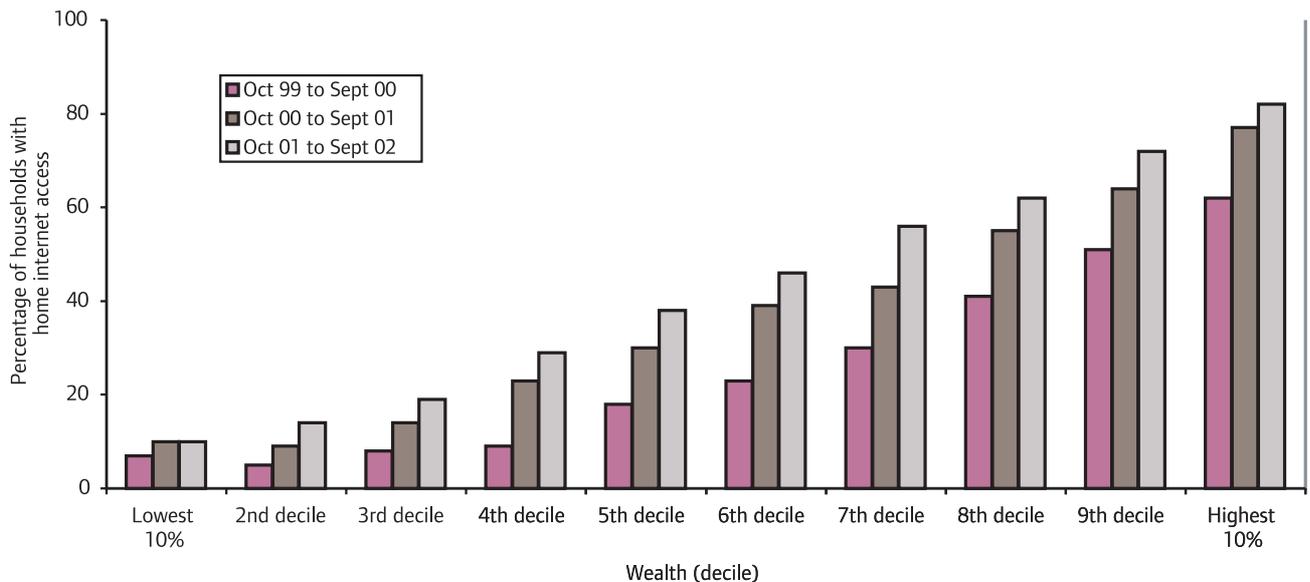
2.5. Characteristics of the digital divide

Statistics reveal that the digital divide and differentiation in ICT adoption in Britain varies by geography and socio-economic factors.

ONS statistics (2002e) reveal that levels of Internet access vary greatly between different parts of the UK. Average household connectivity in the UK was 43 per cent between October 2001 and September 2002. Connectivity in London and the South East was the highest amongst UK regions at 50 per cent. Northern Ireland was the least connected region, where only 30 per cent of households had Internet access.

This disparity in adoption is also evident when one examines socio economic factors. The relationship between household income and Internet access is particularly strong, see Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 The percentage of households with home access to the Internet by gross income decile group 1999 to 2002



source: ONS December Internet Access Press Releases 2000 to 2002. Questions are asked in the Family Expenditure and National Statistics Omnibus surveys.

Other factors affecting the adoption and use of ICTs are life characteristics such as age, gender, disability and ethnicity. All these have been widely researched and are acknowledged as the core barriers to the adoption and use of ICT.

Low levels of education are also a key barrier to ICT adoption and use. Basic ICT use does not require high levels of educational attainment (*European Information Services, 2001*). However, it does require basic literacy skills such as reading and writing. Seven million adults in Britain lack functional literacy and numeracy skills (*Blair, 2002*).

Several surveys have found lower levels of ICT use amongst socially excluded groups. A Department of Education and Skills (2002) survey found that the use of ICTs by socially excluded groups living on council estates with high unemployment was only 16 per cent. Another survey (*Russell and Dew, 2001*) estimated that 25 per cent of adults living on council estates with high unemployment used ICTs. ICT use by the disabled was estimated to be 28 per cent, 32 per cent by those with basic skills difficulties and 36 per cent amongst lone parents.

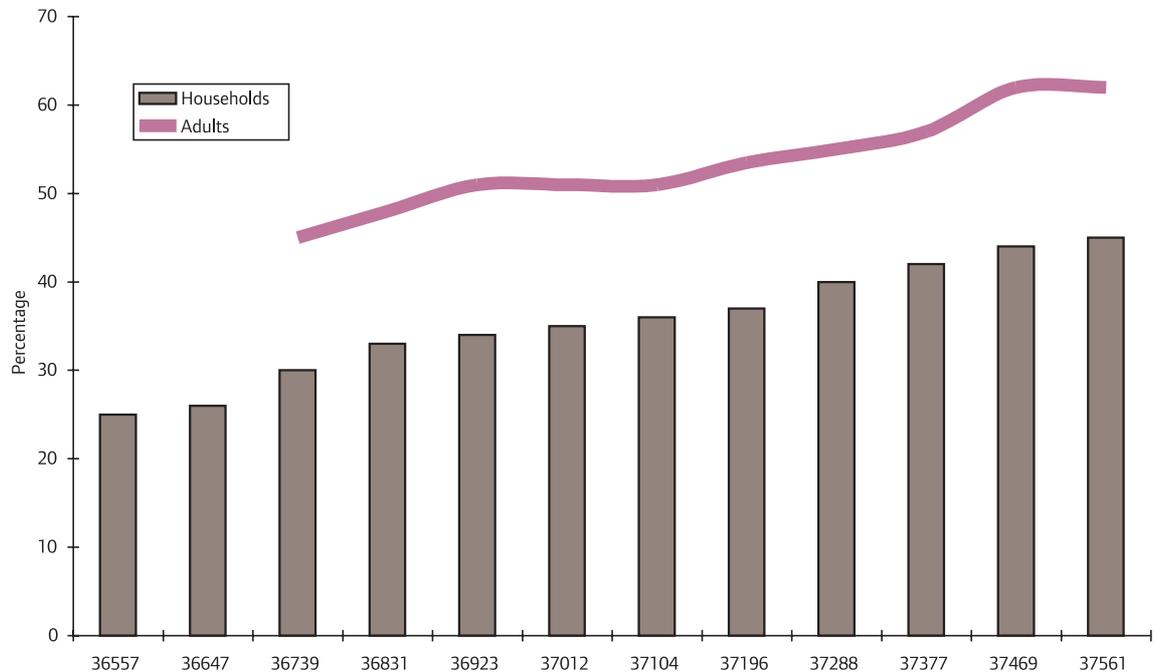
2.6 Digital divide policies and impact

The fact that policies concerned with the digital divide are relatively new, coupled with the presumption of the benefits of ICT use, means that little is known about the success of ICT initiatives. There is also a paucity of knowledge about how users are responding to the opportunities provided by ICTs, beyond relatively simplistic studies and statistics of use by gender, age or location. In addition there is little empirical evidence that relates to how and why people use ICTs and the problems that arise from adoption. This section provides an early overview of policy impact.

The success of many existing policies is unknown because most have only been in existence for a limited duration and evaluation studies have not yet commenced. Nonetheless, it is possible to undertake a cursory review of general progress and a few initiatives, such as the Wired Up Communities programme. Figure 2.2 shows that during the two years up until November 2002 the number of households with Internet access had increased by 2.8 million to 11.4 million (43 per cent of UK households). A similar increase is observed in the number of adults who have accessed the Internet at some time.

Examination of statistics concerning those that have not used the Internet also reveals the success of government policies. In April 2002 20.6 million adults had not used the Internet.

Figure 2.2 The percentage of households with home access to the Internet and adults who have accessed the Internet at some time 2000 – 2002



source: ONS Internet Access Press Releases September 2000 to April 2003.

Figure 2.3 reveals that between January 2001 and April 2002 the number of non-users who stated that they had 'no computer or access to the Internet' declined by just over a million to 5.15 million. This suggests that the government target of creating 6,000 UK online centres, which was completed successfully in November 2002, might have had a positive impact on the perceptions of non-users concerning Internet access.

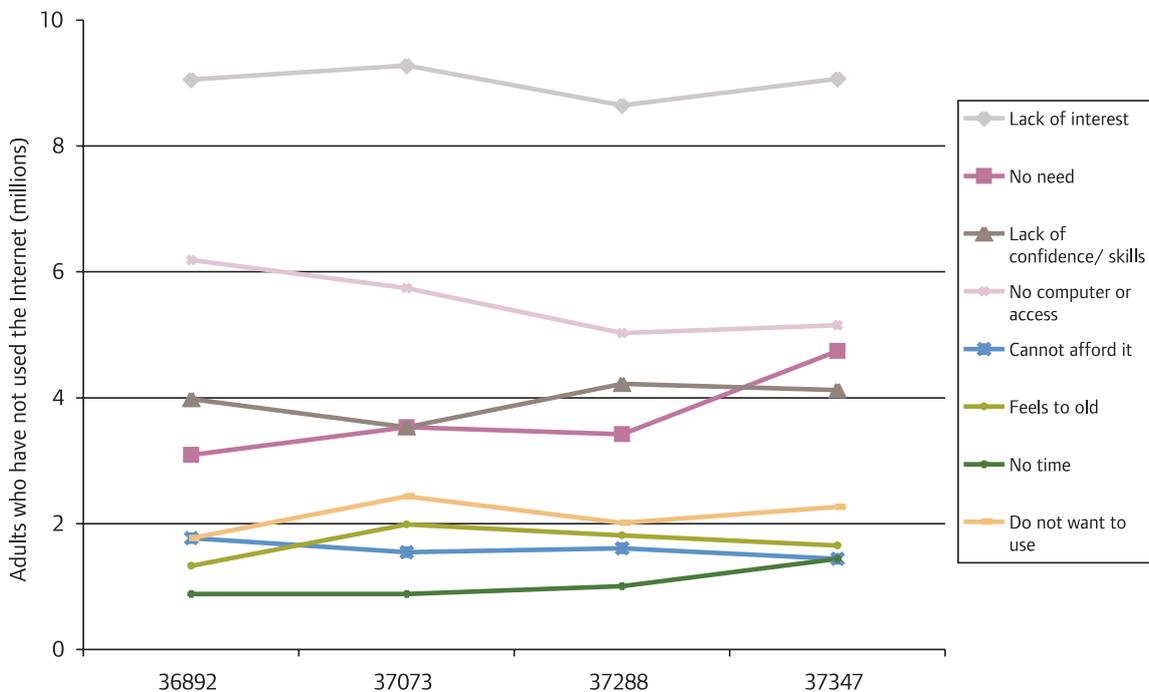
However, this graphic also highlights the large number of non-users that still have a 'lack of interest' in the Internet. Figure 2.3 shows that this group has remained almost constant at 9 million non-users since January 2001. This stability is more significant when one considers that the number of non-users decreased by 1.48 million during the time period covered in Figure 2.3 (January 2001 to April 2002). Even more notable is the growing number of non-users who believe they have 'no need' for the Internet. This group has increased by 1.65 million non-users since January 2001 to 4.74 million users in April 2002.

This interpretation of national figures is confirmed by an evaluation of the Wired Up Communities Programme (*Devins et al, 2003*). Several Wired Up Communities projects struggled to reach the high levels of penetration aspired to by the programme, despite subsidies for users and considerable marketing, promotion and outreach work. In addition, more than a quarter of respondents receiving technology had not used it to access the

Internet, almost half of these reported that they were ‘not interested’ in the Internet

The Wired Up Communities evaluation also questioned the commonly held viewpoint that once people have access to, and have used technologies, they will embrace them wholeheartedly. 18 per cent of Wired Up Communities users stopped using the Internet after the subsidy period had ended.

Figure 2.3 Reasons why non-users have not used the Internet



source: Based on ONS Internet Access Press Releases 26th September 2000 to 2nd July 2002. Results are for adults who have never accessed the Internet.

Research in the US has raised similar concerns. Lenhart et al (2000) found six in ten non-users are not interested in getting online and non-users are moving away from the Internet as they become disenchanted or unconvinced of the value of using it (Katz et al, 2001).

Policy debates have generally focused on Internet ‘access’ issues in terms of financial and technological problems associated with its complexity and diversity (Liff, 2000). A few reports are now starting to emerge that suggest a lack of content rather than access to technology is a critical barrier to bridging the digital divide for many socially excluded groups (Hellawell, 2001). For instance the Children’s Partnership (2000) found that a lack of content created by ethnic minorities was identified as a barrier to use of the Internet by disadvantaged communities in the US.

2.7 The research framework

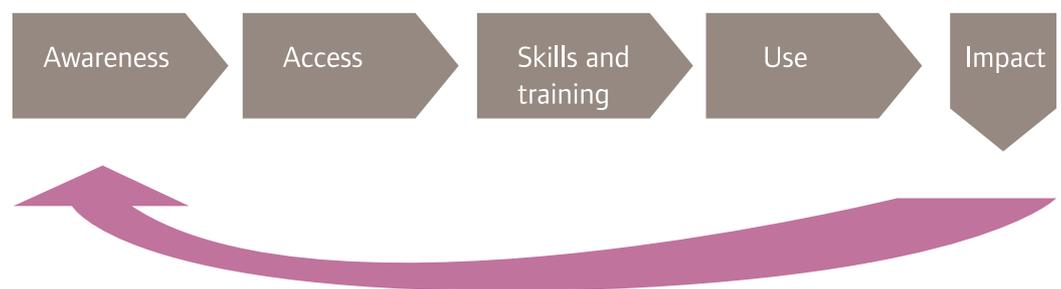


Far more research is required to examine the success of policies and initiatives to promote Internet use. This research project investigates the views of Internet users and non-users about some of the incentives and policy initiatives that have been adopted to encourage Internet use amongst socially excluded groups in London. The study also investigates whether these groups perceive any benefit from Internet use. The framework adopted for this study was first developed during our research for the Digital Divide in a World City study.

The policy intervention framework, shown in Figure 2.4, models the way policy intervention can take place to support and encourage socially excluded groups to beneficially use ICT. It identifies simply the key areas for policy intervention. It is evident that many current initiatives are likely to fail because they are undertaken in isolation without thinking of other elements of the framework or without having a citizen focus.

The feedback loop in Figure 2.4 represents the growing body of information that can be fostered by research or which can travel by word of mouth and encourage other individuals or socially excluded groups to use the Internet.

Figure 2.4 The ICT adoption and policy intervention framework



The framework commences with initiatives to raise awareness of the benefits of ICT. When awareness is raised it is then necessary to provide non-users with access to ICT, this is probably best done alongside skills and training initiatives so that new users are not overwhelmed or confused by technology. It is then necessary to assist new users to access quickly information that is beneficial to them so that they have a positive experience of using the Internet. The nature of training is important; training should focus on user needs. The Wired Up Communities evaluation found deficiencies in local training. Indeed, the impact of

training activities for this programme was unclear since those not receiving training were almost as likely to use the subsidised technology to access the Internet as those receiving training (*Devins et al, 2003 p47*)

As more research is undertaken about the use and benefits of ICT, by this research project and others in the future, it should be possible to gain a better understanding of beneficial impacts on socially excluded groups. These can then become a focus for future access and training initiatives to enhance benefits for socially excluded users.

The bottom line is that if there is no real or perceived benefit to socially excluded groups in using ICT they are very unlikely to make use of it. If these benefits or impacts are known they can become the focus for initiatives and other policy elements earlier in the policy development framework and the needs of socially excluded groups will be met and the digital divide bridged.

2.8. Conclusions

The impact of policies to address the digital divide has received little attention. Research has shown that there have been successes. Internet adoption amongst UK households rose by more than 120 per cent in the three years up until November 2002. The number of non-users stating Internet access as a barrier declined by 17 per cent between January 2001 and April 2002.

On 19th November at the eSummit Tony Blair (2002) declared that the opening of the six thousandth UK online centre was a significant milestone in ensuring 'access for everyone who wants it by 2005'. He noted that '£6 billion will be invested in ICT over the coming years' and 'digital transformation cannot be restricted to the few, our success depends on extending it to the many'.

The proliferation of policies aimed at widening access and addressing the digital divide have been introduced in the belief that lack of access is a key barrier and that providing access will automatically increase Internet use. One obviously cannot question the importance of providing access. However, one could question the importance of providing access if there is no underlying value to users.

Access is a precondition for Internet use, but supporting activities such as raising an awareness and desire to use the Internet and the provision of training to develop basic levels of ICT skills are also important. In addition, if ICT policies are to support effectively policies addressing social

exclusion, much more needs to be understood about the role of ICT in the lives of socially excluded individuals and communities. This study attempts to address many of these important issues and provide a better understanding of the role of ICT in the lives of socially excluded groups, and crucially whether it is possible to identify any observable value to people in these groups.

3 methodology

3.1 introduction

One hundred and thirty people took part in this study. Our approach and the methods used to ensure the robustness of the research are described in this chapter. Throughout the study the ICT adoption and policy intervention framework (see Figure 2.4) was used to structure and guide the research.

The first section examines the use of focus groups. The second section describes how participants were selected. The third section describes the supplementary information that was obtained from participants through questionnaire surveys. The final section examines our discussions with ICT and community online centre managers.

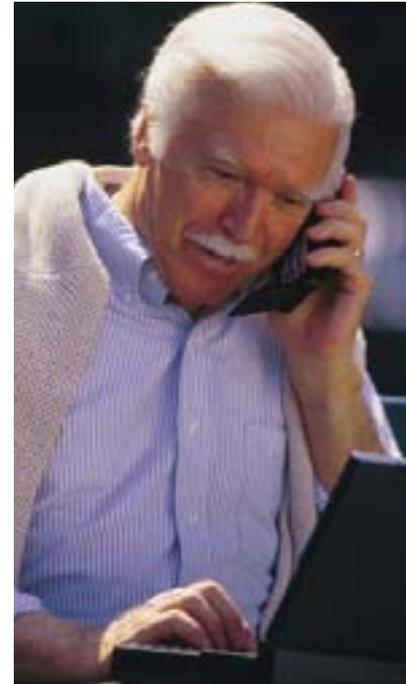
3.2 Focus groups

The primary advantage of focus group research is its ability to examine respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way that is not feasible using other methods. These attitudes, feelings and beliefs may be partially independent of a group or its social setting, but they are more likely to be revealed by the social gathering and interaction undertaken during focus group sessions. Focus groups are particularly useful when the everyday use of language and the culture of particular groups are of interest (*Morgan and Kreuger, 1993*).

Focus group discussions often enrich the quality of the data collected by research. Participants frequently question each other and provide reality checks on each other's responses (*Jarrett, 1993*). Another benefit is that focus groups elicit information in a way which allows researchers to find out why an issue is salient, as well as what is salient about it (*Morgan, 1988*). As a result, the gap between what people say and what they do can be better understood (*Lankshear, 1993*).

Compared to individual interviews, which aim to obtain individual attitudes, beliefs and feelings, focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional processes within a group context. Compared to observational studies, a focus group enables the researcher to gain a larger amount of information in a shorter period of time.

This study adhered to the recommendations of leading scholars and focused on ten primary question areas. These unstructured, open-ended themes allowed respondents to answer from a variety of viewpoints. The five stage ICT adoption and policy intervention framework (see Figure 2.4) was used to structure and develop the ten themes used in focus group discussions.



Jacqui Waters, an experienced facilitator, who had worked with the research team on previous projects led the focus groups discussions with socially excluded groups.

In line with Morgan's (1988) recommendations, which suggested there should be sufficient focus groups to capture the views of distinct sub-groups from the target population, nineteen focus group sessions were held with socially excluded groups. The way participants were selected is described in the next section.

The average size of focus groups convened for this study was six people. This group size is towards the lower end of recommendations (*Merton and Kendall, 1946*; suggest six to twelve people). But this was thought to be beneficial in investigating a complex topic with socially excluded participants.

All focus group sessions were tape recorded. In addition, a research assistant was present to ensure that additional information was collected without the facilitator becoming distracted. The assistant focused on recording information such as the particular emphases of discussions and the level of non-verbal agreement or disagreement (nodding heads or a lack of eye contact).

Content analysis was used to extract the salient points from all focus groups sessions. Analysis examined trends and patterns that re-appeared in either a single focus group or among various focus groups. The consistency of comments and perceptions was also analysed in detail.

3.3 Selecting focus group participants

Confidential access to the GLA's 2002 London Household Survey enabled the selection of focus group participants on the basis of :-

- Use of the Internet
- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Disability
- Presence in the household of children
- Income
- Employment status

An important component of this research project was to examine the impact of current policies to address the digital divide. Recent and



longstanding users of public access points and online centres were therefore selected for inclusion in the research. We are grateful to all the online centre managers and staff that helped us to convene these focus groups. The criteria for selecting the nineteen socially excluded focus groups are shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Criteria used to select the focus group

	ICT User	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Presence of Children	Low Income	Employment status	ICT Centre User
1							●	●	
2		●	●			●	●		
3		●	●				●		
4					●				
5	●				●				
6			●		●				
7	●		●		●	●			●
8	●								●
9	●	●	●					●	
10				●					
11	●		●	●					●
12									●
13									●
14	●		●	●		●	●	●	
15	●								●
16	●		●						●
17	●		●						●
18		●	●			●	●		
19	●		●	●			●	●	

Our previous research highlighted that focus groups are most productive when they have participants that are similar (i.e. all of one ethnic group and age range or of a similar gender and disability). Most focus groups were therefore very similar in composition. However, our previous experience with Citizens Online’s EverybodyOnline initiative revealed that sessions that mix ICT users and non-users (but in every other respect draw together a group of similar people) can lead to an interesting dynamic that resolutely examines the benefits for ICT. Eight sessions had a mixture of users and non-users.

Previous research also highlighted the need to keep the topic of the focus group discussion as broad and uncontroversial as possible. For this reason all those contacted were invited to ‘a small meeting to talk about how you get to know about what’s going on in your local community’. This ensured

that we achieved a broad representation from the local community and anyone fearful of computers or the Internet was not alerted to this focus. Instead questions concerning ICT emerged during discussions about local community activities.



Another important consideration was the selection of suitable venues for focus group meetings. Neutral venues, acceptable to local people, generally not in public sector premises, were chosen for this study. Sessions took place at various times throughout the day – morning, afternoon, twilight and evening. This ensured the maximum variety of participants were able to attend.

We would like to express our thanks to all those that took part in this research project.

3.4 Questionnaires and the focus group participants

At the end of each focus group session, to enhance the amount of information that could be collected, participants were also asked to complete a single page questionnaire. Collection of this data after focus group sessions prevented discussions from having to linger on the collection of factual data.

The questions were designed to mirror those asked about Internet use and non-use in the Office for National Statistics' Family Expenditure and National Statistics Omnibus surveys. This enabled comparison of the socially excluded participants in this survey with the UK population.

Two questionnaires were prepared; one for ICT users, the other for non-users. These are shown in appendix 2. By examining the two groups separately it was possible to compare attitudes and perceptions. For instance non-users were asked for the information they had sought from terrestrial sources in the last year. This enabled a methodology to be developed (see chapter eight) that standardised access to information amongst socially excluded groups. The 'real' level of use and benefit from online information access by socially excluded groups could therefore be examined.

Interesting comparisons were also possible between non-users perceptions of the cost of Internet use and the costs incurred by users in obtaining online access.

3.5 ICT centre managers focus group

One focus group session, towards the end of the project, was held with public access point and online centre managers. This session provided a 'reality check' to ensure that the results we were obtaining, and our interpretation of them, was in line with managers' experiences of assisting socially excluded groups.

Discussions with managers examined each of the five stages of the ICT adoption research framework (see Figure 2.4). To ensure the validity of this exercise ICT centre managers were asked for their views on each stage of the framework, before a short pre-prepared PowerPoint presentation from a member of the research team. A staff member of the GLA was in attendance to observe the process and ensure that our interpretation of convergence and agreement with managers was correct.

There was a high degree of similarity between managers' views and the initial results from this study. An example of key concepts not commonly identified in the literature but confirmed by our study and managers were:-

- Many people are curious about the Internet and when offered the opportunity to 'try it', often in another context or non-ICT centre location, many are happy to 'have a go'.
- There is a good level of knowledge of the services offered by public access points or ICT centres, but many do not know where they are located in their local community.
- Many centres offer a wide variety of ICT courses to meet the varied needs of centre users. But many new users are confused by the range of courses and they find it difficult to determine which course would best meet their needs.
- Users find few problems in saying they cannot use IT, the same level of openness would not arise if they declared a deficiency in basic literacy skills. IT training can provide a valuable first step to starting learning again or improving literacy.
- eMail is without doubt the most used and most instantly rewarding activity for new users. However, email is often regarded as something separate from the Internet.

3.6 Conclusions

This chapter has described the approach adopted for this study and the methods used to ensure the robustness of the research.

Throughout this study the ICT adoption and policy intervention framework (see Figure 2.4) was used to structure and guide the research. The remainder of this report uses this structure to present the results of our research. The next five chapters examine each stage of the model.

4 ICT awareness

“You can’t convince people. Just make sure they are well informed and let them make their own decision.”

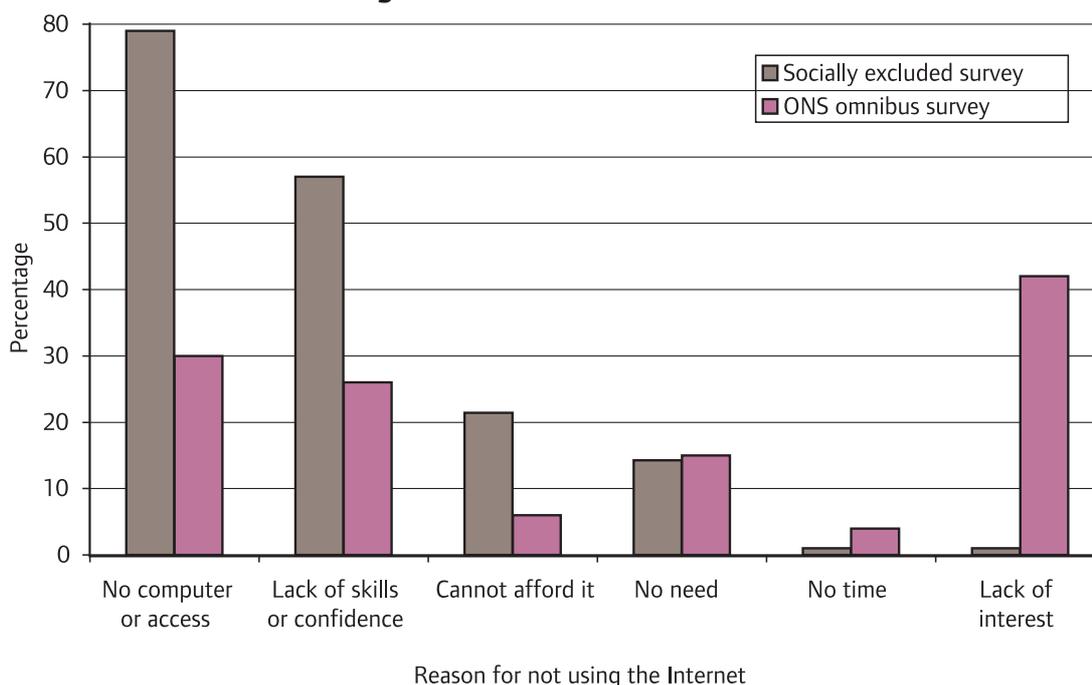
4.1 Introduction

Focus groups spent some time discussing how users first became aware of the Internet and their attitudes to the Internet before they became regular users. This chapter reviews the barriers to Internet use and the advantages that were perceived for the internet. Barriers and advantages are reviewed separately. The chapter then concludes with participants views about the way they would encourage hesitant non-users to use the Internet.

4.2 Perceived barriers to Internet use

Figure 4.1 provides an overview of the main reasons given by the non-users interviewed for this study (12 per cent of the sample) about their reasons for not using the Internet. It must be noted that the sampling frame used to select participants focused on socially excluded Internet users, consequently Figure 4.1 represents the views of only 14 participants. Interestingly, it also provides a comparison of the views of the group of socially excluded non-users surveyed in this research project with the views of all UK non-users (taken from Family Expenditure and National Statistics Omnibus surveys).

Figure 4.1 Reasons for not using the Internet



source: ONS Internet Access Press Release April 2003. Questions are asked in the Family Expenditure and National Statistics Omnibus surveys.

It would obviously be dangerous to suggest that the group of 14 Internet non-users interviewed for this study could be representative of all non-users. This is a particular concern regarding issues such as 'lack of interest', since by definition those attending focus group discussions must have a higher level of motivation or interest to discuss topics and ideas than other Internet non-users. Nonetheless, discussions established that the views of the 14 non-users concerning skills and perceptions of cost appear to closely match the experiences of the socially excluded participants in this survey before they became Internet users.

The three primary barriers to Internet use by socially excluded groups identified by all participants in this study are:-

- Confidence and skills,
- perceptions of cost,
- lack of a computer.

Low confidence and skills were prevalent amongst nearly all participants in this study when they first started using the Internet. Figure 4.1 shows that this factor was more than twice as prevalent amongst our group of socially excluded non-users (57 per cent mentioned lack of skills or confidence) than it was in the ONS national survey (26 per cent in February 2003).

Lack of confidence and skills is probably exacerbated because computer use amongst the socially excluded group in this study at work appeared to be far lower than amongst the general population (see Figure 5.1). Low confidence and skills are particularly prevalent amongst more elderly participants.

There is evidence that amongst this socially excluded group the usual 'circle' of family or friends that could offer help and support in overcoming problems might be more limited, due to lower levels of adoption of computers generally amongst socially excluded groups. Indeed, one unemployed participant said rather wearily that "if the Internet was gone tomorrow I would have a relief that I am no longer obliged to use this system that I can't get the hang of". It is evident that initiatives to improve confidence are particularly important for socially excluded groups.

"Ideally you need a young relation to help you cope. It's not just using the Internet, but problems with the computer as well."

The second reason provided for not adopting the Internet was cost. There



was a general perception amongst nearly all participants, and particularly amongst non-users, that a new computer costs about £800. In reality a reasonable computer (brand name – 1.8GHz, 128MB, 40GB with a CD player and monitor) can be obtained for less than £400.

There were also relatively high perceptions of the cost of monthly Internet access; on average non-users thought this would cost £28 per month. In reality the participants interviewed who had been using the Internet for less than a year estimated that they were paying £11.90 per month for Internet access.

“The telephone bills can go sky high.”

Purchase of a new computer (£381.87 for the PC noted above) and £12 a month for Internet access will be a considerable burden for many socially excluded groups, but it is evident that perceptions of the magnitude of Internet costs are unfounded. However, further research is required to investigate whether better knowledge of the ‘real’ costs of connection and access would encourage higher levels of Internet adoption amongst socially excluded groups.



It is evident from the preceding discussion that lack of a computer is inextricably linked with a perceived lack of resources to purchase a computer and perceptions of insufficient skills to make full use of a computer. However, the next chapter demonstrates that socially excluded groups make far greater use of libraries and other public access points than the general UK population. Whilst Internet use from a public access point is not as handy as access at home many socially excluded users are willing to endure this inconvenience to obtain Internet use.

“Although it definitely does cost to use the Internet there are ways of getting around it; Internet telephone booths, libraries, places like that.”

Discussions in several focus groups also focussed on the dangers associated with the Internet. Interestingly these were rarely regarded as barriers to use or reasons to avoid the Internet. Instead they were frequently things ‘other people’ should be aware of or things that should be avoided when using the Internet. Particular concern was expressed about parents with children and the presence of pornography on the Internet. One interviewee had also heard “how dangerous it was to let children go into ‘chat shows’ ” (meaning chat rooms).

4.3 Perceived advantages of Internet use



The primary advantage perceived by all Internet users and non-users was the wealth of information that can be accessed through the Internet. This benefit was thought to be particularly advantageous for children and students. The Internet was also perceived as being highly beneficial for the elderly and disabled as an “easy access link between you and the world”. This view was confirmed by one disabled participant, who suggested that the Internet was sometimes very helpful – “you have good days and you have black days, and on a black day you can’t do anything, but sometimes you need to buy something and the Internet comes in very useful then.”

“If I have any queries I will go straight to the Internet.”

Interestingly, the information sought online predominantly concerned answers to specific questions or viewing pages about national news, sport or events. The Internet was rarely viewed as a good source for local news and events. Reasons for this are obviously diverse, but there was a general perception that national information sites are well advertised, up-to-date and easier to use. Local sites were often less well known and sometimes thought to be poor in comparison with one-stop-shops that serve the local community.

For most enquiries the Internet was generally perceived as being quicker and easier to use than the local library. One recent Internet user suggested that in the past his view was “what do I need all this information for? I can go to the library and find most of this”. However, after using the Internet for a while he “began to realise the potential and advantages to using it”. One person from an ethnic group reflected the views of many participants when she suggested that “you get the same information that you can get from other sources, but quicker and maybe even more diverse.”

“The possibilities are endless on the Internet.”

Some focus groups highlighted the time and money savings associated with Internet use. Many participants noted that it was often difficult to find the precise information required on the Internet. But after a while Internet search skills developed and it was much quicker to obtain information online than it was by walking to the local library. Several participants also highlighted how much quicker, easier and less expensive it was to correspond by email. For example one person said “I have to sit down, write the letter, put it in an envelope, then go to the post office,

buy a stamp and put the letter in the post box, but email makes it so much easier... as long as the person I'm writing to has a computer of course". Another member of the same focus group realised after using the Internet for the first time that it would cost a lot less to email his family in other countries than it would to phone them.

Despite this predominantly positive outlook some participants were dubious about whether all the additional information on the Internet was really useful to them. There was also a large group that found it difficult to find the precise information they required. Comments such as "search engines overwhelm you with huge amounts of information" and "information should be made easier to find or to get to" were frequently heard.

"If you need access to all that information it is worth having. But some people are quite happy with the levels of information already at their disposal."

4.4 Conclusions and methods to encourage Internet use

The preceding sections have highlighted a number of key barriers and advantages to Internet use and policy implications of these are considered below. However, it is worth first highlighting the considerable curiosity nearly all users had about the Internet before they started to use it.

"You just have to plant the seed of curiosity in their head."

ONS reports have suggested considerable lack of interest in the Internet. The broad extent of those uninterested views was not evident in this study, though once again it is accepted that all of those that took part in this survey chose to attend and talk with others in a focus group. It is possible they have a more curious and inquisitive outlook than others.

"I started because I wanted to see what it was all about."

This relatively high level of curiosity is matched by the sense of achievement when some of the basic skills have been acquired and confidence has been attained. This level of satisfaction was particularly evident amongst elderly people and those that had not previously used computers.

"There is a good sense of achievement when you get somewhere; particularly at my age."

Initiatives to raise curiosity and promote how satisfying it can be to master the Internet have not been prevalent. If undertaken they should be accompanied by methods to promote confidence, satisfaction and

skills at a public access point. "Try IT" events with friendly helpful staff could be very productive, events of a similar style have been reported as being successful by ICT centre managers. Greater use of the Internet with friends or at work (where usage levels appear to be low) could enable this curiosity to be pursued, but support might not be as professional or readily available.

Campaigns playing on non-users curiosity will need to be accompanied by information about benefits that the Internet can provide. Chapters seven and eight investigate these in more detail. It is evident amongst the participants in this study that the route to getting online is frequently a two stage process and at each stage the benefits provided by the Internet need to be highlighted. The first stage, amongst our socially excluded participants, was the decision to try the Internet at a public access point, in a community group or another location. Only 26 per cent of those using the Internet for less than twelve months had access from home. This decision to try the Internet, predominantly at an access point will be stimulated by curiosity and some idea of the benefits that can be provided.

The second and usually later stage of the process; purchase of a computer for home, appears to be made on predominantly economic grounds. One participant suggested that a single benefit or reason was not a good enough reason to invest in getting online at home. Instead many felt that one big reason or a selection of small benefits was required before they would consider buying a computer and getting Internet access. At this point curiosity will be less of an influence and better understanding of the benefits of Internet use and the real costs of getting online will be important. There is probably an important role for public access points to play in highlighting the benefits of Internet use and clarifying how cheaply computing equipment and Internet access can be acquired.

Public access point and online centre performance should not just be evaluated on the basis of the numbers of users they attract. They should also be encouraged to promote home Internet use.

An important strand of this research project is to investigate the benefits of Internet use to socially excluded users.

Our recommendation that online centres should promote home Internet use is not dependant on an advantage being identified by this project or other research for all socially excluded users. Instead it emphasises the requirement to provide centre users with information about the advantages and costs they need to consider when deciding whether they will benefit from Internet use in their own home.

Finally, much of the preceding analysis, and debate about the digital divide, has focussed on the benefits of obtaining access to the Internet. It is also important to consider what might happen if socially excluded groups do not have access to the Internet. Many definitions of social exclusion highlight non-participation in economic and social activities, isolation and a perceived lack of opportunity. This lack of participation or isolation or lack of opportunity can be exacerbated through a lack of access to information and communication technologies and the Internet. Whilst lack of access to ICT is not the cause of social exclusion, it has the potential to further exclude individuals and groups.

“If you learn how to use computers and the Internet, it’s of no huge benefit. However, if you don’t learn you are behind socially.”

5 ICT access

“If you have a bit of spare time you’ll love it.”

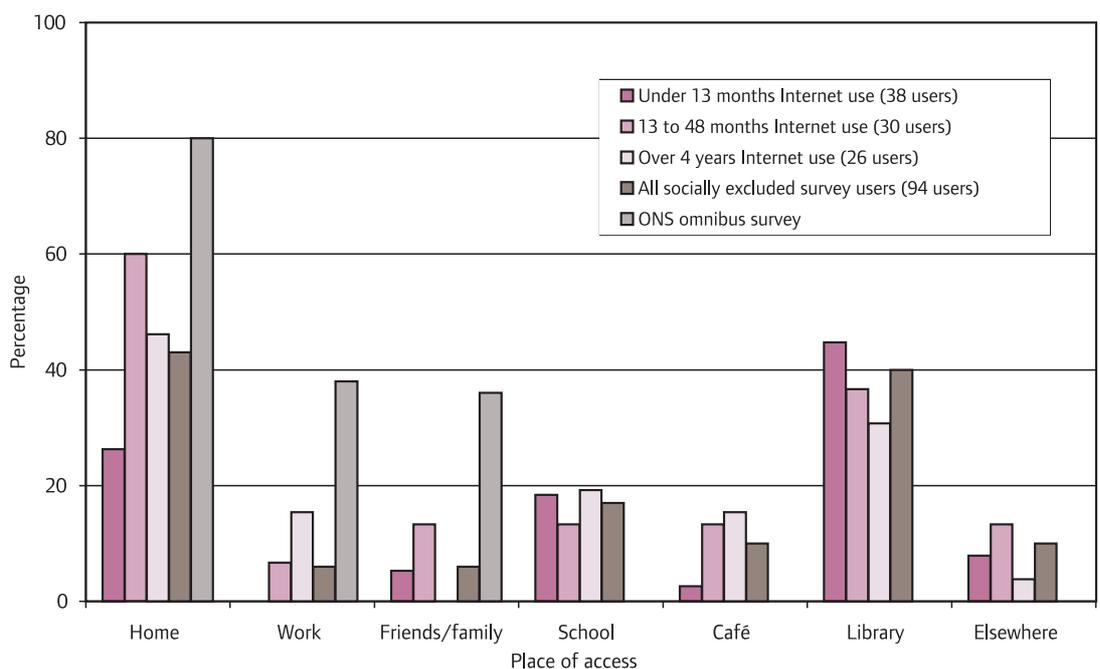
5.1 Introduction

Focus groups examined how users first accessed the Internet and their attitudes to public access points. This chapter reviews barriers to Internet access and the beneficial activities which led participants to access the Internet for the first time. These barriers and benefits are reviewed separately. The chapter concludes with participants’ views about how people like them can be encouraged to use the Internet or go to a public access point. Recommendations for the development of online centres to enhance their use by socially excluded groups are also proposed in the conclusion.

5.2 Access barriers

Figure 4.1 in the preceding chapter highlighted that the main barrier to Internet use was the lack of a computer or access. It is therefore not surprising that the socially excluded participants in this study had utilised a wide variety of methods to get online. Figure 5.1 shows that the Internet users in this study have far lower access to the Internet from home than UK users as a whole (taken from the family expenditure and National Statistics omnibus surveys).

Figure 5.1 Where participants use the Internet



source: Survey and ONS Internet Access Press April 2003. The ONS only report data for the first three location shown above

The ONS survey in February 2003 found that 80 per cent of UK users had Internet access from home. Importantly, this study of socially excluded groups found that only 43 per cent used the Internet from their own home. Access from home was least (26 per cent) for those that had been using the Internet for less than a year.

This lower level of home access amongst new users appears to reflect the desire of socially excluded users to 'try' the Internet before purchasing it for their own home. This assumption is partially confirmed by the fact that use in libraries decreases with the length of time participants use the Internet and with the increase in home Internet use. However, even amongst socially excluded participants that have been using the Internet for more than four years access from public access points, such as a library or school is still relatively high. During focus group discussions it was apparent that 'free' access points, particularly for users on metered Internet access tariffs, provide a valuable method of reducing Internet access costs.

However, one of the difficulties identified by some participants was the problem of booking a time slot to use the Internet at many libraries. As the next section reveals, one of the key benefits of many public access points is the ease of access to the Internet at almost any time.

An additional problem associated with using public access points for many users was their lack of confidence or fear of using a computer in a public place. Nearly all of these participants noted that these concerns were unfounded and assistants at public access points were very helpful. But this fear of having to seek help or of making a mistake loomed very large for some participants.

"You don't like asking questions because you don't want to look stupid."

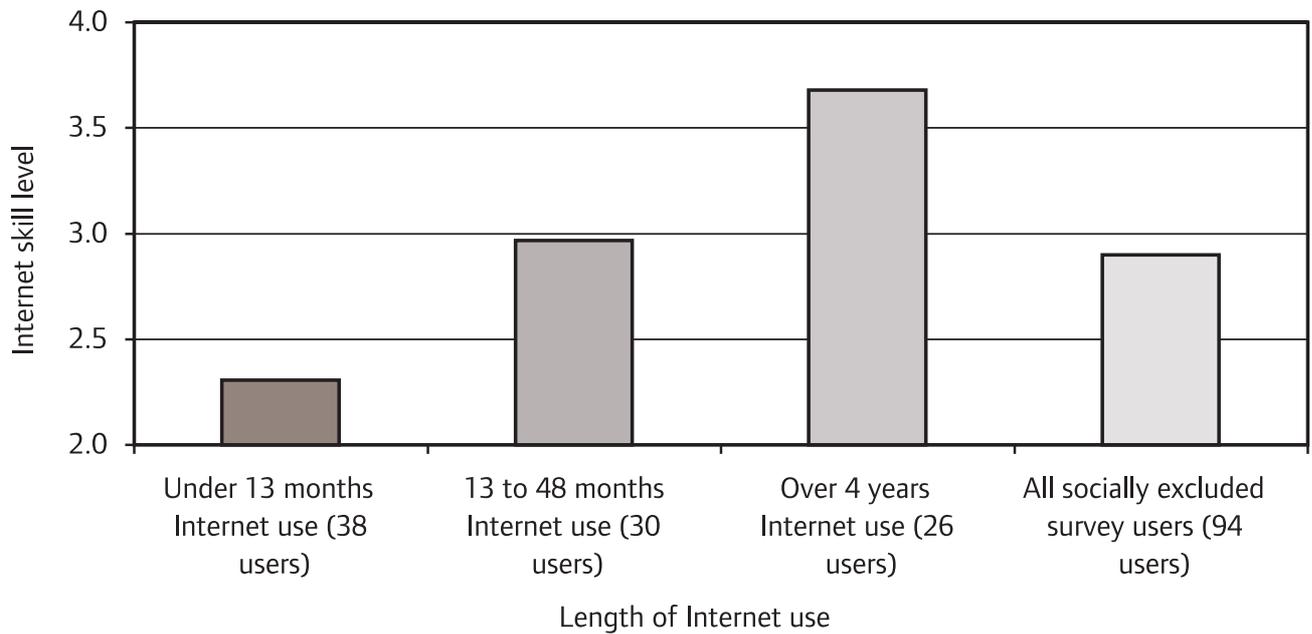
It is also notable from Figure 5.1 that Internet use at work by socially excluded groups (overall only six per cent have work access) is significantly lower than for the UK population (ONS survey 38 per cent had work access). There could be considerable scope for promoting Internet access initiatives in the workplace for socially excluded groups.

A more cautious approach to spending for online access is also evident amongst socially excluded users, see Figure 5.2. Those that have only been online for a year or less estimate that they spend an average of £11.90 per month on Internet use. This figure rises to an average of £12.90 for those that have been online less than four years. Socially excluded participants that have been using the Internet for more than

four years spend £17.40 on average for Internet access each month.

“The computer eats up time and the cost is a great deterrent.”

Figure 5.2 Monthly costs of Internet access



5.3 Access benefits

The preceding section outlined the lack of confidence or fear that some new users have of entering an online centre and displaying their lack of skills or making a mistakes. This problem has to be contrasted with the three major benefits that online centres provide. These are:-

- Opportunity,
- help and assistance,
- free Internet access.

The previous chapter highlighted the high level of curiosity amongst many non-users about the Internet. Public access points and online centres provide an opportunity for everyone to investigate the Internet and explore what it can provide for them.

The welcoming and helpful attitude of staff at nearly all online centres was thought to be a major advantage in enabling people to relax and in helping them to use the Internet effectively, usually on the first occasion that they ever used it. For many this degree of assistance and help was unexpected. However, when good service was provided it often acted as a catalyst, new centre users frequently encouraged friends to 'try' the centre and the Internet.

"The Centre is welcoming and the staff are helpful, so it makes you want to come back and learn more."

The relatively low level of Internet access from home highlights the importance of public access points amongst socially excluded groups. Many users mentioned the advantages of home access – "having your own computer is the best way to learn, because you can try it when it suits you and you don't have all those other people around you like you do in a library". Nonetheless, there was almost unanimous support that the best way to get online was with a friend or at a public access point. "Trying it" was a phrase often heard in focus group discussions. The concept of 'having a go', generally in a supportive environment, was thought to be the best way to first experience the Internet.

"Let friends try it with you at your house, or tell them about the online centres."

5.4 Conclusions and methods to encourage Internet access

The preceding sections have reviewed barriers to Internet access and the beneficial activities which led participants to access the Internet for the first time.

It is apparent that use of computers amongst socially excluded groups is limited. There is also evidence that employer investment in wider learning has been in decline in the UK over the last three to four years (UK Research Partnership, 2002). Initiatives to encourage employers to broaden access to the Internet and ICT training in the workplace should therefore be introduced. Particularly in localities or amongst firms that have a high proportion of socially excluded workers.

Online centres play a very important role in assisting socially excluded groups to get online. To investigate this area further one of the focus group sessions was convened with fourteen online centre managers. These discussions highlighted a number of do's and don'ts that online centres should adopt to promote the use of their centres. These are provided below in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Advice for ICT centre managers

Do's	Don'ts
Provide a pleasant environment with approachable staff. Try to permit a wide of opening times.	Don't hide; make the centre noticeable from the outside.
Provide new users with a warm welcome.	Avoid a school-like environment.
Make the venue a social experience and fun – not old, drab and techy.	Don't have too many forms.
Have varied access to ICT, not just at benches or desks.	Don't stress qualifications.
Take/introduce ICT in other environments (community centres, hostels) or use vehicles that provide ICT access.	Avoid making people wait.
Introduce ICT by stealth – i.e. put library catalogues online or provide computer access to commonly used information.	Avoid old and slow ICT equipment.

Whilst 'small is beautiful' and 'local is beneficial', a lack of scale or size can leave some centres with too few resources to develop their activities more fully or even to provide their current services at the level that users require. Alliances might be beneficial or centres could be supported through a dedicated resource centre that could provide shared access to resources such as staff training, mentoring, equipment, a staff locum service, and the development of an information and good practice exchange programme.

As a first step to developing good practice and identifying what a resource centre might provide (and there are a number of existing agencies in London where such a facility might be hosted), a London wide conference should be organised to share the results of this feasibility study and to develop new approaches to encouraging Internet use amongst socially excluded groups. This could become a regular event or lead to a series of smaller workshops at the sub-regional level.

This study found ICT managers very helpful and perceptive in commenting on early results from this study. A larger group could be a useful sounding board to consult or develop policies for addressing the digital divide in London.

6 ICT skills and training

“Having computer skills is like reading or writing; you aren’t complete without them. Not having computer literacy is a gap in your life.”

6.1 Introduction

The study was carefully designed to seek the views of online centre users about the assistance, training and support these venues had provided. Five focus group sessions were held at ICT centres with both new and experienced users. In addition, community associations and other organisations that offered support for Internet users or hosted user groups were also approached to provide socially excluded participants to take part in the research. This variety of participants provided a thorough insight to the formal and informal learning and skills development activities undertaken by new and more experienced Internet users.

This chapter reviews the problems that participants experienced in developing their Internet skills. The second section examines the methods used to develop skills and the advantages of online centres. The chapter concludes with an overview of key factors and recommendations for the development of Internet skills and training activities to address the needs of socially excluded groups.

6.2 Problems encountered by socially excluded groups when developing Internet skills

There was a relatively good level of awareness of online centres and the training they can provide amongst nearly all the focus groups. UKOnline centres, for instance, were often mentioned in general terms. However, the location of these centres was not always known. Some centres were criticised for being behind bland facades and not making their presence or what they do more widely known.

97 per cent of the participants in this study that had been using the Internet for less than three years were interested in receiving help or training to improve their Internet skills. However, this assistance was only required by 58 per cent of participants that had been using the Internet for more than three years.

“There are training schemes but they are called different things and run by different people.”

One consistent complaint was the bewildering array of Internet training and skills development courses provided by online centres and other learning centres. Most participants knew that there are lots of different

ICT courses and classes, but they are often confused over what is right for them. Greater clarity in the level or content of courses is required. One participant suggested the need for a unified or standardised national Internet training scheme.

However, the development of any unified training scheme would have to accommodate one of the primary training requirements of nearly all participants. Courses have to be relevant to participants. This requires flexibility and breadth in Internet skills development. Assistance for first time or new users was thought to be best when it had a specific focus that met the information needs of the new user. This demonstrated the immediate relevance of the Internet to the individual and they were frequently encouraged to find out more. This type of assistance does not follow any formal pre-determined structure and it cannot be regarded as a 'course' or 'lesson'. But it does introduce the new user to many of the basic elements of the Internet and Internet use.

“You have to show people what they might need the Internet for. If they don't see a need there is no point trying to persuade them.”

After initial 'goal-directed' assistance many users returned to “try other things on the Internet” or they enrolled on courses. These courses were best received when they were relevant to users. This usually necessitated another goal-directed approach. This requires the provision of a wide range of courses to meet the needs of a variety of users. The pace of courses also needs to be adjusted to accommodate the needs of users. Socially excluded groups probably exhibit a wider variation in basic literacy levels than other groups.

“When you get old you become computer illiterate. You can't learn the skills very quickly and it takes some repetition.”

Online centre managers highlighted that there is often a conflict between funding organisations desire for accountability and monitoring and users' desire to use services on an ad hoc basis with informality and freedom. Surreptitious monitoring with smart cards and log-in id's was often used to overcome this conflict. The managers also mentioned that ICT skills development can often be provided by 'stealth' as part of a package of community development activities.

6.3 Advantages of Internet skills development

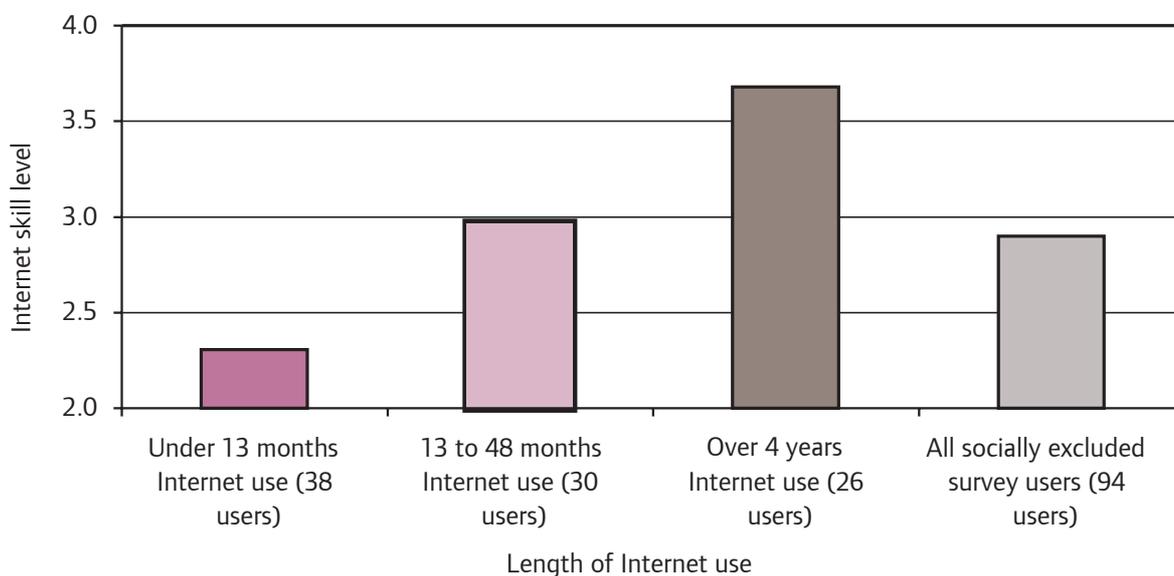
Many first time online centre users and beginners attending courses were worried about exposing their ignorance and making mistakes. Most

centres were very aware of this concern and they offer a very welcoming and supportive environment. They also offered flexibility by giving help to all visitors with problems, by providing drop-in classes and by offering courses that participants were not obliged to attend every week or on a regular basis. This approach enhanced the ability of centres to provide the one thing most socially excluded participants desired – the opportunity to try something they were curious about.

“The centre is welcoming and the staff are helpful. It makes you want to come back and learn.”

By having the confidence or getting encouragement from friends or family to seize this opportunity many participants had gone on to develop their Internet skills. Figure 6.1 demonstrates that skill levels develop steadily over time.

Figure 6.1 Internet skills development by participants



Skill levels 2 = beginner, 3 = intermediate, 4 = advanced, 5 = expert

“The best thing about the Internet is that it’s an education. It keeps my brain active so that I don’t go ga-ga.”

Some of the stimulus for skills development was founded on a desire to improve an important basic skill and undertake a relevant training or educational course. However, for others skills were developed informally and the key stimulus was simply to pursue an interest or use the Internet better for the things they wanted to do. Many participants in this latter goal did not attend formal training sessions. Help was usually sought from friends or family. Two focus groups were undertaken with a small group of predominantly older people that had formed themselves into an Internet interest section of their local community association. The group meet every month and discussed topics of common interest, in between monthly sessions help and assistance was also sought from each other.

The development of informal networks of friends to help participants overcome Internet problems was relatively common. Many ICT centre managers also remarked upon how beneficial it was that centre users often returned on a voluntary basis to assist and help with course provision. The use of these volunteers was widespread. They were thought to be particularly useful role models demonstrating that “people like us (new users) have attended courses and can now do it”.

6.4 Overview, conclusions and recommendations

Many participants expressed the need to have a ‘helping hand’ or ‘someone on tap’ to assist them when they encountered problems using the Internet. Staff at online centres provided this assistance. This assistance was also provided by the development of self-help groups and access to a network of family or friends. There are many facets to social exclusion, but an important dimension is reduced social cohesion. It is therefore possible that many socially excluded Internet users might not have access to a wide range of support networks to overcome computing problems. Assistance and support is available at online centres, but it could also be useful to provide this type of general help and support online or over the telephone.

“You need somebody on tap there whenever you have a problem.”

A centralised help desk providing online or telephone help could be established alongside the London online public access point resource centre suggested in the previous chapter. This centre could also provide information about Internet training courses. If sufficient information was available from providers about the courses they offer it could be possible to present these to potential course attendees in a framework or typology that was easy to understand. This might help to overcome the complaint that many participants had about the bewildering array of Internet training and skills development courses.

“I find it hard to overcome some problems on my own, but if someone gives me a nudge in the right direction I can usually figure it out.”

This approach would simply categorise and present courses in a common, more easily understood format. Criteria for categorisation would need to be investigated further with socially excluded groups, but it might consider elements such as user’s existing skill level, topic for course focus, style of delivery (e.g. sit-down formal, drop in class) and other factors.

“There should be one site where all the Internet classes are listed.”

This would not require the development of a unified training scheme for all courses provided by online centres. It is acknowledged that entry level courses for socially excluded users need to be delivered as close to the communities as possible. This enables them to respond more effectively to local needs and circumstance. However, there is evidence that the provision of courses and assistance by online centres is variable. UK Partnership (2002) report that UK online and Learndirect centres have not yet established a minimum set of quality standards. Establishment of a minimum set of standards or quality marks could help to raise the standard of Internet training in London.

In the future, after the analysis of courses provided in London by a centralised training information centre, commonly provided courses or highly beneficial courses (for socially excluded groups) should be identified and learning materials (online, CD or booklets) could be provided to deliver the courses. These types of materials could also be designed to support existing course delivery more effectively. Alternatively, a review of courses might identify gaps in provision to socially excluded groups that might be provided more cost-effectively through the proposed centralised training support centre.

The preceding recommendations have focussed on the development of formal mechanisms to develop Internet skills. More assistance could also be provided to encourage and support the development of informal Internet support groups by community associations or neighbourhood groups.

Participants and online centre managers highlighted that people are often happy to say they cannot use ICT, but they are less happy at stating they lack basic literacy skills. Attendance at an online centre to learn how to use the Internet can be a stepping-stone to starting learning again or improving literacy. Several managers felt this opportunity was often not given enough recognition. Better

communication and liaison between online centres and neighbourhood learning centres should be encouraged to enhance this opportunity.

Commentators have also observed that there is a growing reliance on ICT as an aid to learning. Considerable additional benefits in promoting literacy and skills development and perhaps economies of scale could arise from closer liaison and/or co-location of online centres with neighbourhood learning centres.

Developing Internet skills may not lead directly to employment or any other quantifiable output, but recommending learning for many socially excluded groups can help them move on and overcome some aspects of social exclusion.

7 ICT use

“On the Internet you have access to everything whenever you need it. Our lives have become busier and it fits with your life.”

7.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 highlighted that few studies have been undertaken that investigate Internet use by socially excluded groups. This study has examined how these groups use the Internet and comparisons with ONS surveys of all UK Internet users have been undertaken. The impact of Internet use on the lives of socially excluded groups is reviewed in the next chapter. This chapter provides an overview of the way the Internet is used by socially excluded groups.

The first section examines general Internet use patterns by socially excluded groups. Latter sections examine the use of the Internet for shopping, for health and welfare and for education. The chapter concludes with an overview of key uses of the Internet by socially excluded groups.

7.2 Internet use by socially excluded groups

The value of the Internet in providing “information on everything” was recognised by nearly all participants. However, some Internet users, particularly new users or those with poor search skills, often felt overwhelmed by the amount of information that was returned by search engines to simple enquiries. Several felt there was “a lot of rubbish on the Internet” and one suggested “that most of the time I end up giving up”. However, these frustrated views were not common and most users had managed to develop their Internet skills and find the information and web sites they needed fairly easily. Many users had a small number of web sites that they returned to on a regular basis.

“You need to get into mindset, a way of thinking ‘what will be a good keyword for this’.”

Email is widely used by all participants. All those that had been using the Internet for more than four years (26 participants) were using email and average levels of email use amongst the socially excluded participants in this study were much higher than those found in the ONS UK study, see Figure 7.1. Interestingly most participants regarded email as somehow separate from the Internet. The immediacy and communication provided by email are very valuable, particularly for sharing pictures and digital photographs. Online centre managers also highlighted how teaching new users about email provides an instantaneous ‘win’ and sense of

achievement that “they can now do what everyone else is talking about.” When a reply arrives new users have an even greater sense of achievement and increased appreciation of one of the key benefits of the Internet.

“After a while you know what website to look at and you know what clicks to make.”

Email provided some racial or ethnic groups with the ability to stay in touch with friends and family at a fraction of the cost required to communicate by telephone. For many socially excluded groups these cost savings were an important benefit. The ability to also share photographs or other scanned images was thought to be particularly advantageous. One elderly participant received a picture of her new great grand daughter only three hours after she was born.

“I can remain in touch with my family and friends no matter how far away they live.”

Several participants suggested that they now used the Internet to get the latest news or sports information. However the news and information sought was predominantly national or international. Local information was generally regarded as poorly represented online. Local newspapers, notice boards, libraries and one-stop-shops were thought to be better sources for local information.

“The Internet is a last resort for local information.”

Racial or ethnic groups frequently used the Internet to access International newspapers and web sites that provided information about the countries or groups with which they felt an allegiance. Many participants mentioned that the Internet is especially useful because it allows them to access news and information in their own language(s). The BBCi news section, which can be accessed in several different languages, was frequently praised. International news sites were often viewed on a daily basis.

Internet access to UK newspapers and news sites was also regarded as useful by some participants. One suggested that “if I want a newspaper first thing in the morning, I would have to go out into the cold or the rain and walk to the newsagents to buy one, but now I don’t have to; I can just go straight to the internet.” However this approach could also have a downside for the local shop or for those who used to welcome a trip to the post office but now get their benefit payments made directly into a bank accounts.

An additional benefit identified by deaf people is the ability to read web pages on the Internet at their own pace. Several complained that services such as teletext were too fast in this respect.

For some socially excluded participants the Internet provided the opportunity for communication and participation in activities even though they were housebound or lacked mobility. Several used chat rooms and one played bridge with a group of partners all over the world on a regular basis.

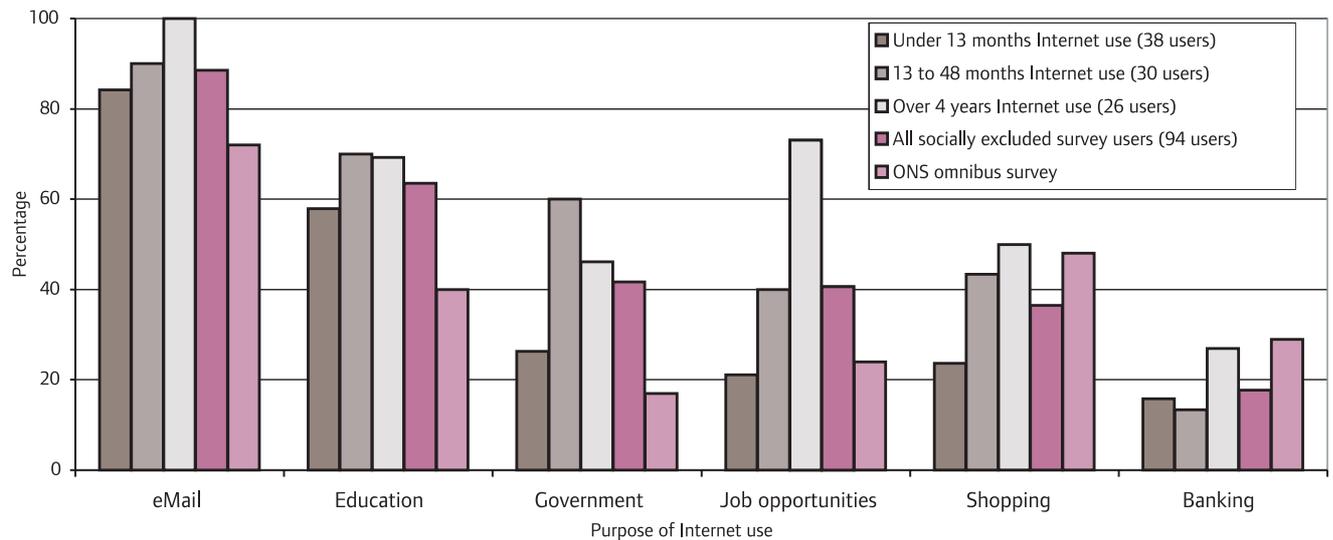
Focus group discussions revealed an awareness of broadband amongst participants. Many had seen adverts on television but most did not really understand what it was or how it might be useful to them.

7.3 How the Internet is used by socially excluded groups

Figure 7.1 provides an overview of the primary uses for the Internet by the socially excluded participants that took part in this study. Interestingly for nearly all uses it shows an increase in activity with the length of time the socially excluded user has been connected to the Internet, this is particularly the case for email use, searching for job opportunities, shopping and banking.

Figure 7.1 also compares the purpose of Internet use of the socially excluded users in this study with an ONS survey undertaken at a similar time (February 2003). This comparison shows far higher use of the Internet by socially excluded groups for all activities except those that require monetary transactions (i.e. shopping and banking). Higher levels of use amongst socially excluded groups for education (average for all socially excluded groups 64 per cent, ONS 40 per cent) and Government information (socially excluded groups 42 per cent, ONS 17 per cent) are particularly significant.

Figure 7.1 A comparison of Internet use by socially excluded groups and all UK Internet users



source: Survey and ONS Internet Access Press April 2003.

It is necessary to stress that the participants attending focus group sessions probably have a higher level of interest to discuss topics and ideas than others and this may affect their outlook on matters such as education and using government services. But nonetheless until further surveys of socially excluded groups are undertaken this is the best insight into the different uses of the Internet by socially excluded groups.

Patterns of Internet use will obviously be affected by many socio-demographic factors. Because socially excluded groups have lower levels of disposable income it is not surprising to find lower levels of online shopping in Figure 7.1. It is also well known that socially excluded groups are higher users of government services. However, the magnitude of these differences has not previously been investigated and the higher level of use of information about education and job opportunities in Figure 7.1 suggests that the Internet could be having an impact in improving the circumstances of socially excluded groups.

A methodology was developed in this study to investigate how the use of the Internet by socially excluded participants compares with the

information requirements of socially excluded non-users. This new methodology helped to find the real level of information use online by standardising access against the topics that are relevant to the interests of socially excluded groups. This method helped to overcome spurious comparisons that might have been made by comparing Internet information use for socially excluded groups with all UK Internet users. For example it is well known that socially excluded groups seek more medical advice and benefits information than the general UK population.

The 'information use standardisation procedure' compared the information requirements of socially excluded Internet non-users with the information gathered online by socially excluded Internet users. All non-users attending focus group meetings were asked whether they had sought information on particular topics in the last year. These requirements were then compared with the same categories of information that had been found online by socially excluded Internet users. The objective of this exercise was to see if the Internet provided socially excluded groups with enhanced access to information. Obviously this information found by a simple question in a short one page questionnaire cannot investigate the quality or value of information. But Figure 7.2 demonstrates that it does provide a useful insight to the ability of the Internet to meet socially excluded groups' information requirements. Further research using this methodology could be very beneficial.

Figure 7.2 shows that the information sought most regularly by non-Internet users in the last year was information about government and council services and benefits information (both required by 36 per cent of non-users). Interestingly, a similar proportion of Internet users had accessed online information about government and council services (42 per cent of Internet users), but a far lower proportion had examined benefits information online (23 per cent). This poor level of use of online benefits information confirms the views of focus group participants that online benefits systems have generally been too difficult or unfriendly to use.

All other information topics in Figure 7.2 show significantly higher levels of use by Internet users during the last year than their non-Internet using counterparts over the same time period. The most significant differences are for job opportunities information (no non-users required this information, but on average 41 per cent of Internet users had), education and training information (29 per cent for non-users, 63 per cent for users) and health information (21 per cent for non-users, 51 per cent for users)

Figure 7.2 A comparison of Information sought by socially excluded Internet users and non-users in the last year

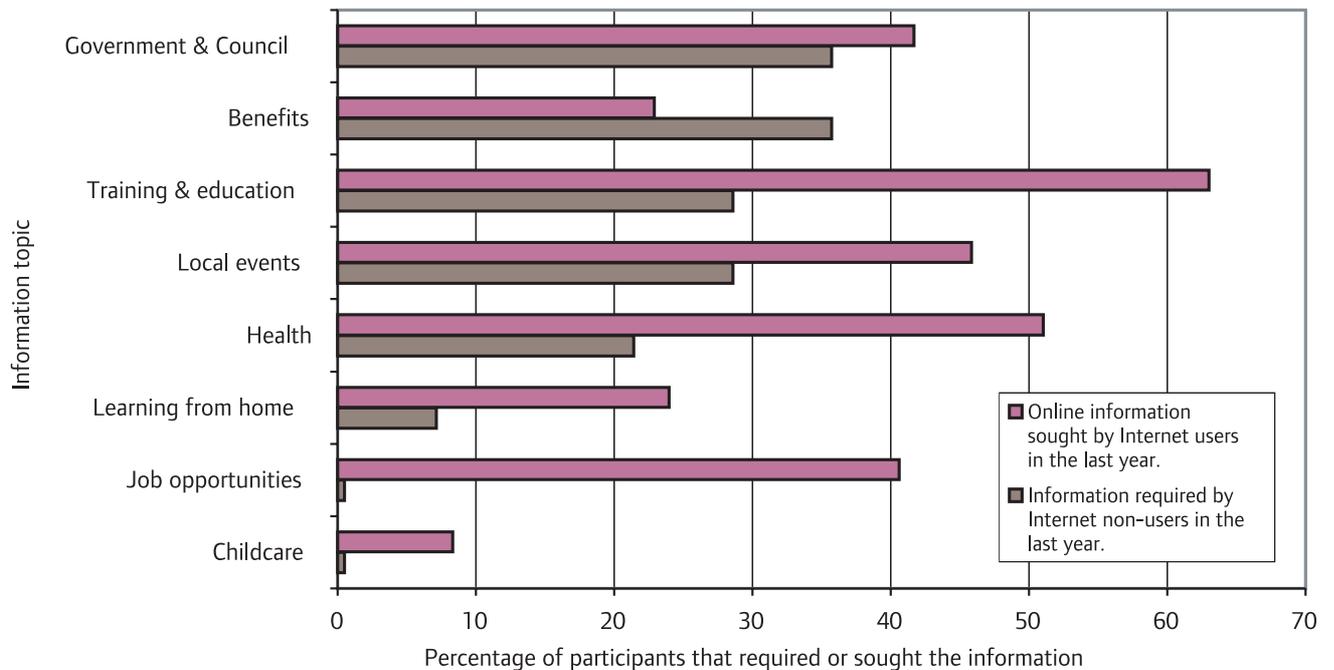


Figure 7.1 shows that levels of online shopping by socially excluded groups increases with the length of time they have used the Internet. Online shopping and banking are highest amongst those that had been using the Internet for more than four years. This reflects the high level of hesitancy and distrust that many new users had about providing their credit card details online and about trusting the vendor to dispatch the goods.

Many participants said that as their Internet skills developed they became more confident that they knew what they were doing and slowly realised that assurances about credit card safety were probably correct. Several users suggested that they were tempted to purchase something online when the discount offered was a significant saving on the price they had to pay in the High Street. One participant suggested that a £10 discount to book an airline ticket online was not sufficient to overcome his concerns. Another participant suggested a £20 saving for the purchase of a book online tempted her to purchase online for the first time.

“Once you have bought something online for the first time you get used to it and don’t worry any more.”

The most popular items for online purchase are books, CDs and travel and entertainment tickets. There were differing opinions about the cheaper

prices for online goods and services. Some participants felt that this view was correct, others thought that cheaper prices online were a myth.

Online shopping appears to be particularly useful for disabled users. It overcomes mobility problems and it also avoids the communication problems that several disabled participants had encountered with shop assistants.

Disabled groups also appeared to find online health information particularly useful. One suggested that “if you have an ongoing illness it’s amazing how little information is available from your GP, but how much information there is on the Internet about your condition.” She suggested that she had actually helped her condition by looking up information online and telling her GP about it.

“If I can summarise my condition, I look it up online and then go to my GP.”

Educational information was another topic in Figure 7.2 where online access to information far exceeds the use of the same information by Internet non-users. Several participants were studying and undertaking courses. They found online access to information particularly beneficial because it frequently saved them having to purchase books or it enabled them to find information when books were not available from a library.

Educational information was also sought to find courses that participants could attend. Ofsted school reports had also been viewed by several participants

7.4 Overview, conclusions and recommendations

It is evident that as socially excluded users’ Internet skills and confidence develop they make greater use of the Internet for email and for accessing online information.

This study has provided the first detailed comparison of the use of the Internet by socially excluded groups with all UK Internet users. Further research of Internet use by socially excluded groups is required to confirm the results of this study. When these studies are undertaken it is important that they also examine the information requirements of Internet non-users. Comparison of the needs of these groups provides a better insight into the topics or areas which socially excluded groups find particularly useful online.

Caveats must be voiced about the relatively small sample size of this

study but initial analysis suggests access to government service information is at about the level that might have been expected by socially excluded Internet users. But a far lower proportion than might have been expected used online benefits information. This low level of use confirms the views of focus group participants that online benefits systems are generally difficult and unfriendly to use.

Email use amongst the socially excluded participants in this study was higher than the level found in an ONS study of all UK users. It was widely used by nearly all participants in this study. Email provided racial or ethnic groups with the ability to stay in touch with friends and family in the UK and overseas at a fraction of the cost required to communicate by telephone.

Online centre managers highlighted how teaching new users how to send an email provides an instantaneous 'win' and sense of achievement in that they can now do what everyone else is talking about. When a reply arrives new users had an even greater sense of achievement and immediate appreciation of the benefits of the Internet.

News and information sought by participants was predominantly national or international. Local online information was generally regarded as poor. Local newspapers, notice boards, libraries and one-stop-shops were thought to be better sources for local information. This view might arise from the comparison of many local sites with better resourced national news sites such as the BBC. Local and regional government organisations might have to address this perception or the quality of local news and information web sites if they are keen to enhance levels of access to local information online.

Concerns expressed by some commentators about a lack of content for socially excluded groups have not generally been confirmed by this study. But the content of web sites providing benefits information and local information do appear to require improvement.

8 ICT impact

“Gradually you find things out, it becomes part and parcel of your life and the benefits outweigh the costs.”

8.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter examined the way socially excluded groups use the Internet. This chapter considers the impact that use has on their lives. The policy intervention framework, used throughout this study, stresses that identification of these uses and their impact is important so that they can be used to raise socially excluded groups’ awareness of the Internet. Promoting these benefits (or overcoming negative misconceptions) can act as a catalyst to increase the curiosity that many socially excluded groups have about the Internet.

The first section of this chapter examines the impact that the Internet has in increasing access to information and communication amongst socially excluded groups. The second section examines the time spent and saved on the Internet. This is followed by a review of the monetary costs and benefits of the Internet to socially excluded groups. The concluding section investigates the ways in which the Internet helps to improve the confidence and self-esteem of some users and the way it can act as a route to further learning.

8.2 Information and communication benefits

Commentators have suggested that some characteristics of social exclusion, such as non-participation in economic and social activities, isolation and a perceived lack of opportunity can be exacerbated through a lack of information and communication. It is evident from this study that Internet access has provided many socially excluded groups with the opportunity to access a wealth of information and to communicate with friends and family in the UK and overseas.

Access to most types of information (shopping and banking are the major exceptions) by the socially excluded participants in this study exceeds the level observed by the ONS in national studies. In addition email is more widely used by socially excluded groups in this study than by the general population.

If the level of use for information access and communication is used as a surrogate for beneficial impact it is apparent that the Internet is not just providing the opportunity for better access to information and communication, it is an opportunity that is actively being seized by socially excluded groups. The remainder of this section considers the

impact of better access to information and communication offered by the Internet.

For nearly all participants the Internet opened up a huge body of information that previously could only be accessed through a library or other media. The speed with which information could be found, once search skills had been developed, was thought to be particularly beneficial.

“The Internet amalgamates all information in one place, so it’s quicker and easier to gather.”

The internet was perceived as good for accessing national or international information, but it was considered to be poor for local information. If the Internet is a conduit to overcoming social exclusion it is probable that information about local and national opportunities and initiatives will be required. At present the local dimension appears to be poor in many areas. Most participants wanted a local one-stop-shop style of web site so that they could access good local information and get “used to the site”, rather than a portal linking several other sites. In general neighbourhood or local information web sites were thought to be out-of-date and difficult to navigate.

Practical information about education and training, health and job opportunities was more extensively used by the socially excluded groups in this study than by the UK population, see Figure 7.1. However, the two areas where Internet access to information did not appear to be as beneficial were in accessing benefits information and government and council sites. Benefits systems are perceived as “too difficult and unfriendly to use”. Many government and council sites are still at a relatively early stage of development, but first impressions are important and for many socially excluded groups these have not been good.

“I went to the council web site, but it was just a list of telephone numbers to ring.”

Most new users perceived the Internet as a good source of information. But its ability to provide and develop skills and training was generally unknown. The ability to search for jobs online was also thought to be very beneficial. Information about health care was sought by more than 50 per cent of users. Health care information was particularly useful to disabled groups. Several knew of friends with rare diseases who had used the Internet to find out more information about their condition. Some had also joined online communities where they could discuss their condition and share helpful advice.

The Internet has also provided many socially excluded groups with access to general information about leisure or social pursuits. One participant had visited the National Gallery web site and was so amazed by how clear the pictures were that she went to see them at the museum. The internet was particularly useful in enabling some ethnic and racial groups to maintain close contact with their homeland. One participant characterised the benefits of wider access to information by suggesting “it provides a very broad education.”

“It’s strange I live in a foreign country but I seem better informed about events back home than when I lived there.”

Probably the largest benefit of the Internet for most socially excluded groups is opportunity it provides for quicker and cheaper communication with friends, family and others in the UK and overseas. Some suggested that if their Internet connection was taken away they would “lose touch with my family overseas as phoning is too expensive.”

“Some of us don’t have phones so email and chat rooms have become really useful for communicating.”

There was some debate in focus group sessions about the negative impact of communication using the Internet. Several suggested “it’s dehumanising, there’s no face to face communication.” Others thought that although grammar and spelling deteriorate using email “at least it is encouraging communication.” One participant suggested that she did not like the “coldness of the Internet society; humans need social interaction.” However, this view was dismissed by many participants who highlighted that Internet access for the elderly and disabled can help them to feel less isolated

“The Internet is a way around many different aspects of disability.”

This view was confirmed by many elderly and disabled people. A deaf participant said that Mincom and Type Text telephone services were useful to them but not everyone has these facilities. This participant stated that “the internet has really opened the world up to me. Everything is available in a text based format so it is very easy to find out about things.” Using the Internet to communicate is also important for those with speech or dexterity problems. The Internet provides practical advantages as well as therapeutic benefits. Internet communication has enabled many disabled participants to remain ‘active’. One participant found that the ability to communicate using the Internet boosted his confidence and he regained his ability more quickly

than previously when he did not use the Internet.

“The Internet provides me with a lot of independence and interaction.”

Previous chapters have shown that the development of Internet skills and greater use of the Internet for communication and information access grow as users spend more time online. This process, and the impact or benefits provided by the Internet, is gradual. But for many socially excluded participants this impact has become significant and when asked what would happen if they lost the Internet many were “horrified.” One participant suggested it would “take away my right to information.” It is therefore important in any survey of Internet use amongst socially excluded groups to be aware of the increasing benefits and impacts that arise over time. It is also vital to consider the different benefits that the Internet provides to different socially excluded groups. This is best exemplified by considerable benefits many disabled groups obtain from the Internet.

“Losing the Internet would upset my routine; I’ve become so used to having it.”

8.3 Time impact

The preceding section primarily focused on the qualitative benefits and impact of the Internet. These can be exceedingly valuable, but it is problematical to attribute a time or monetary value to them. This section therefore examines the time savings and time costs associated with Internet use.

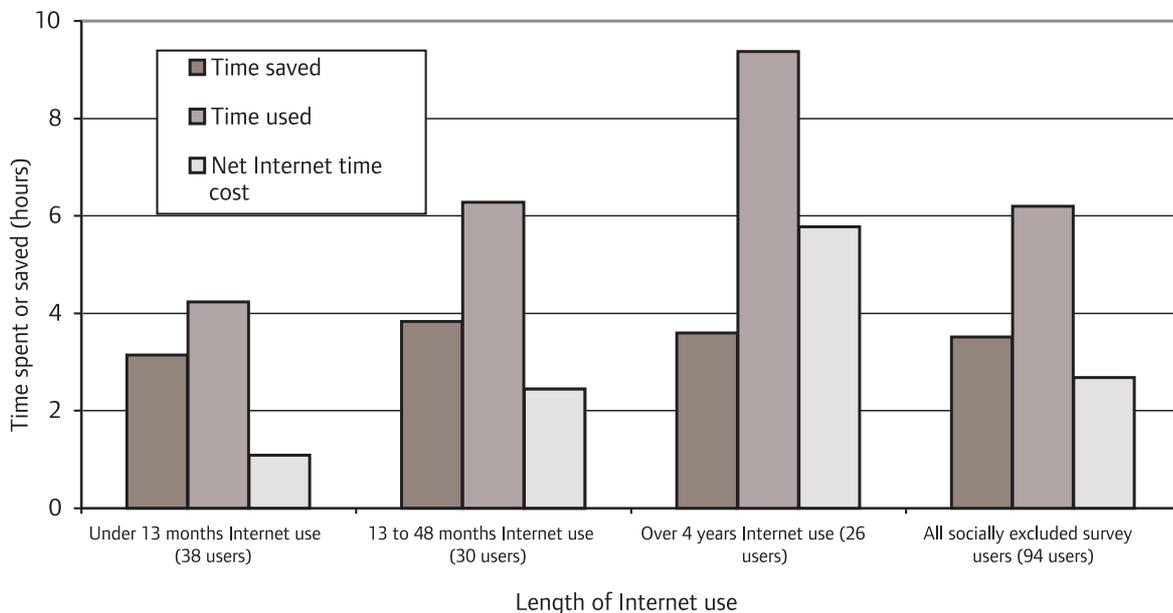
“The computer eats up time and the cost is a great deterrent.”

One of the primary benefits of online access to information is the time that can be saved in comparison with searching for information in a library or when telephoning for assistance. One participant said she checks bus and train times online “because ringing up takes ages.” Other participants suggested that to their own surprise they were now starting to get annoyed when shops, adverts or items they bought did not have a website or email address because they despised the time and cost of contacting organisations for further information by telephone.

“The Internet is much easier than going out to do whatever you were going to do. It’s quick, simple and you don’t need to drive or jump on a bus.”

Participants answered questions about their time spent online each week and the time savings the Internet provided. Figure 8.1 shows that the time participants spend online each week increases with the length of time they have used the Internet. Those that have been using the Internet for less than a year spend on average 4.2 hours a week online. Participants using the Internet for more than four years on average spend 9.4 hours a week online. The average for all users is 6.2 hours.

Figure 8.1 Average time spent and time saved online each week by socially excluded Internet users



However, this investment or time cost does bring about time savings. Internet users were asked how much time they thought they had saved each week by using the Internet to collect information, for online shopping and for communication. The average time saving of 3.5 hours is shown in Figure 8.1. Interestingly, this time saving does not appear to increase with the length of time participants have used the Internet: New users saved the least time (3.2 hours a week) and those that had been using the Internet for between one and four years saved the most time (3.8 hours).

The 'net time cost' of Internet use is shown by the blue columns in Figure 8.1. Whilst this concept may at first sight appear meaningless, it does suggest the net perceived benefit in time savings is greatest for new Internet users. This group on average spend 4.2 hours online each week, but they save 3.2 hours, so their net time cost is one hour.

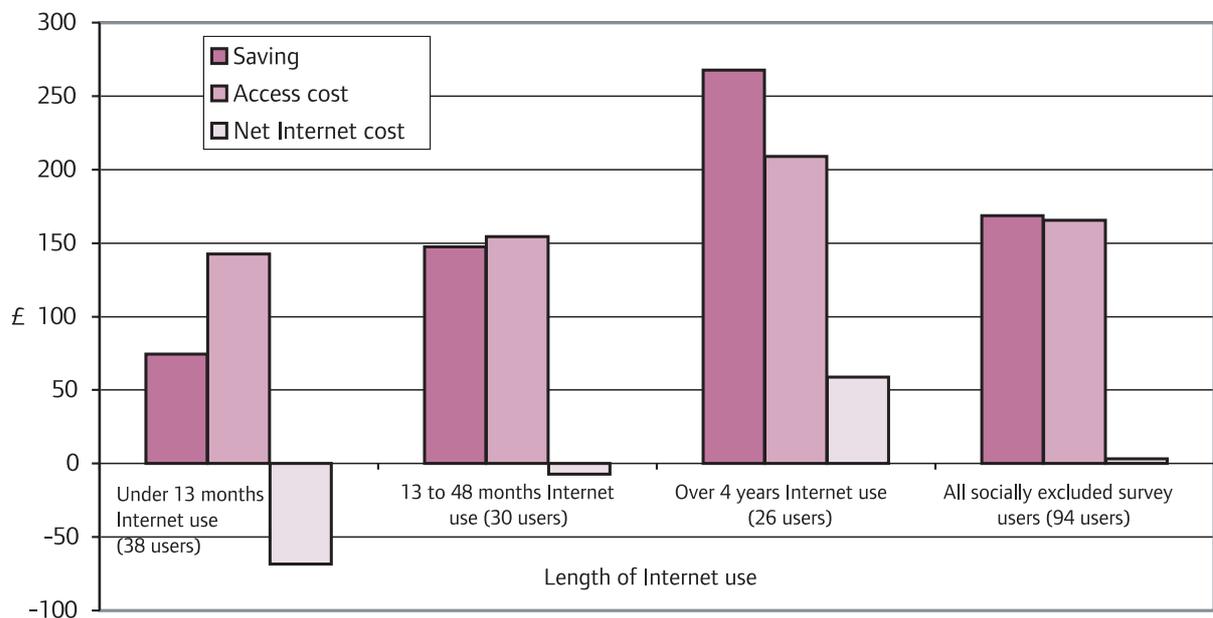
This concept is one way of measuring the 'net inputs' required to receive benefits or impact from Internet use. The next section examines the monetary value or 'outputs' received from Internet use.

8.4 Monetary impact

This section investigates the monetary impact that participants obtain from Internet use. It focuses primarily on individuals and socially excluded groups, but several sessions revealed an awareness of the wider costs and impact of the Internet. One participant raised the issue of downloading music on the Internet. She felt it was “leading to the collapse of the music industry and that it was a waste of a valuable resource”. Others suggested that the Internet could lead to the demise of music and book shops on the High Street. This was thought to be particularly detrimental for their friends and colleagues that did not have Internet access. Indeed, they thought these people might already be disadvantaged because some goods could be purchased more cheaply on the Internet. There was scepticism from some participants about savings to be made from online shopping. However as Figure 8.2 shows many users estimate that they had saved several hundred pounds by using the Internet.

The previous chapter (Figure 7.1) highlighted that online shopping increases with the length of time users have been online. It is therefore not surprising to find that the largest savings made by using the internet in the last year were found amongst those that had been using the Internet for more than four years, see Figure 8.2. This group on average saved £268 a year. Those that had been using the Internet for less than a year only saved £74 through online shopping. The average saving for all participants was £169.

Figure 8.2 Average annual spending on Internet access and savings on online shopping by socially excluded Internet users



Any estimate of the net savings derived from Internet use have to take account of the cost of Internet access. Figure 8.2 shows that access costs increase with the length of time participants have been using the Internet. Those using the Internet for less than a year pay £143 a year on average for access. Access costs rise to £209 for those using the Internet for more than four years. The average cost for Internet access is £165 a year.

This cost was compared with savings from online shopping to estimate the 'net cost of Internet use', this is shown by the blue columns in Figure 8.2. Once again this concept or approach needs to be treated with caution, significant non-monetary benefits, such as communication, participation, learning and confidence also arise from Internet use. It must also be noted that online shopping is only possible for those with credit cards and many socially excluded groups experience difficulties in obtaining credit cards. Nonetheless, using simple monetary criteria it is evident that overtime significant monetary benefit can arise for socially excluded groups from Internet access and use.

In the first year of access and use there is an average deficit of £68 in the cost and benefits of Internet access. Access cost for those that have been using the Internet between one and four years are not significantly greater than for new Internet users, however their savings from online shopping are higher and their average net Internet deficit is only £7. The greatest net beneficiaries are longer term Internet users, this group have an average credit of £59. The average net benefit for all Internet users is a small credit of £4.

It is apparent that the net deficit amongst new users could be reduced if they made greater use of online shopping. However, until further research in this area is undertaken it will not be clear if this group lack the funds to shop online or whether they do not have sufficient skills or confidence to shop online.

Whilst it must be acknowledged that this approach is relatively simplistic (and self estimation is a relatively crude approach) it does, for the first time, provide monetary values for the cost and impact of Internet access amongst socially excluded groups. At the most basic level it shows that the average cost new users incur for Internet access is £143 in their first year. At a basic level it appears that this investment and the benefit derived from Internet access must be considered worthwhile because in later years their peer group (often present in the same focus group session) are willing to spend more for better online access or to be able to spend more time online. The average cost for those using the Internet for more than four years is £209.

The annual cost for Internet access that socially excluded groups choose to incur is their baseline for evaluating whether the costs outweigh the benefits. If one also considers monetary savings from online shopping (see Figure 8.2) these costs are significantly reduced. One or two participants noted after completing our questionnaire that they had not previously thought about the costs and benefits of Internet use. However, one group came to the conclusion that the costs of using the Internet were almost completely outweighed by the advantages of being able to get the information they wanted. This view was reached without considering savings from online shopping. Figure 8.2 demonstrates that these can significantly reduce net costs.

8.5 Miscellaneous and unquantifiable impacts

Preceding sections have focused on direct benefits from Internet use in terms of information, time or money saved. However, as earlier sections have shown considerable personal and emotional benefits can result from using the Internet. Several participants started using the Internet because they were curious and “wanted to see what it was all about.” Having seized the opportunity provided by online centres or other venues most had mastered many of the basic skills and had a strong sense of achievement and pride in what they had accomplished. This sense of achievement was often enhanced by the pleasure of receiving their first email reply or through regular communication with friends and family. Placing a monetary value on these emotions is problematical and churlish.

Many participants also achieved considerable pleasure and pride in being able to find information online more easily and in developing their computing skills. For some participants, particularly those with poor basic literacy skills and the elderly, using the Internet and developing their computing skills was a stimulus to starting learning again.

8.6 Conclusions

Commentators have suggested that some characteristics of social exclusion, such as non-participation in economic and social activities, isolation and a perceived lack of opportunity can be exacerbated through a lack of information and communication.

This study has, for the first time, investigated the impact of ICT on socially excluded groups. This analysis has shown that Internet access can enhance participation, reduce isolation and access to information can provide an entrée to wider opportunities. These benefits should help to overcome some aspect of social exclusion. However, the limited scope of

this study makes it impossible to know if these benefits only help at the margins or whether, in combination with other initiatives, they might be effective in addressing some of the core issues associated with social exclusion. Further research is required to investigate this more fully.

The policy intervention framework used throughout this study highlights the need to identify clearly the impact of the Internet so that these benefits can be used as catalysts to raise Internet awareness. It is important that benefits are carefully targeted for specific socially excluded groups. Different benefits from Internet use arise for some socially excluded groups. This is best exemplified by the way the Internet can enhance communication and reduce the isolation suffered by many older people and disabled groups. However a common core of benefits or impacts is also evident.

The use of email was greatly valued by nearly all participants. Indeed, email is more widely used by the socially excluded groups in this study than by the general population. Email was perceived as a quick and cheap method of communication particularly when contacting friends and relations overseas. For the elderly and disabled email reduced feelings of isolation and it enhances their ability to participate more widely in society.

If the level of use of online information is used as a surrogate for beneficial impact it is apparent that the Internet is not just providing wider opportunities. These opportunities are actively being seized by all socially excluded groups. Access to most types of information by the socially excluded participants in this study exceeds the level observed by the ONS in national studies.

Disappointingly, there was a relatively low level of access to information that is thought to be directly useful to socially excluded groups to enhance their circumstances. Use of online benefits information was lower than expected because web sites were frequently found to be too difficult and unfriendly to use. Use of government web sites was also lower than might have been expected amongst socially excluded groups (in comparison with a peer group of Internet non-users).

However, there was a high level of access to information about skills and training, jobs information and information about health care. Health care information was particularly useful to the older people and disabled groups.

If the Internet is a conduit to overcoming social exclusion it is probable that information about local and national opportunities and initiatives will

be required. At present the provision of local information appears to be poor in many areas.

The average that new users pay for Internet access in their first year is £143. It appears that this investment or the benefit derived from Internet access must be considered worthwhile because in later years their peer group (often present in the same focus group session) are willing to spend more for better online access or to be able to spend more time online. Indeed, there was a consensus in many focus group sessions that the costs of using the Internet were almost completely outweighed by the advantages of being able to get the information they wanted.

A simple method of analysing inputs and outputs from Internet use has been developed. Inputs are measured in terms of time spent using the Internet minus the time savings obtained from using the Internet. The average time spent online by all users was 6.2 hours per week. The average time saved by using the Internet to collect information, by online shopping and by quicker communication was 3.5 hours a week. Net time benefits are greatest for new Internet users. This group on average spend 4.2 hours online each week, but they save 3.2 hours, so their net time cost is one hour.

Outputs were measured by the monetary value of savings from using the Internet for online shopping and communication minus Internet access costs. Average Internet access costs were £165 a year. The average saving on online shopping and communication was £169. Thus use of the Internet had a net benefit or credit of £4. Participants that had been using the Internet for four years or more estimated that they saved on average £268 per year.

It is acknowledged that this approach is relatively simplistic. However, it does, for the first time, provide monetary values for the cost and impact of Internet amongst socially excluded groups.

Participants also noted the non-pecuniary benefits derived from the Internet. New users gain a considerable sense of achievement from mastering basic computer and Internet concepts. This pleasure appears to increase with age or social exclusion. For some participants, particularly those with poor basic literacy skills, using the Internet and developing computing skills was a stimulus to start learning again. This group exemplify the wider opportunities stimulated and grasped by using the Internet. They also epitomise the difficulties of assessing whether Internet access only helps at the margins or whether in combination with other initiatives, it may be effective in addressing some of the core issues associated with social exclusion.

9 conclusions and recommendations

9.1 The context for examining ICT and social exclusion

In November 2002 at the eSummit Tony Blair declared that the opening of the six thousandth UK online centre was a significant milestone in ensuring 'access for everyone who wants it by 2005'. He noted that '£6 billion will be invested in ICT over the coming years' and 'digital transformation cannot be restricted to the few, our success depends on extending it to the many'.

The case for policy intervention is usually based on the historical precedent that emphasis in the development of telecommunications infrastructure has usually been placed on the development of the most lucrative markets, thus excluding people and places that are least profitable. Others have argued that Internet content providers focus on the development of commercial sites for the affluent members of society.

Research has only recently started to investigate whether there is exclusion from access and research examining whether there is a lack of suitable content is sparse. Despite this lack of hard evidence commentators have speculated on the detrimental impact that a lack of Internet access and restricted use of ICTs might have on socially excluded groups.

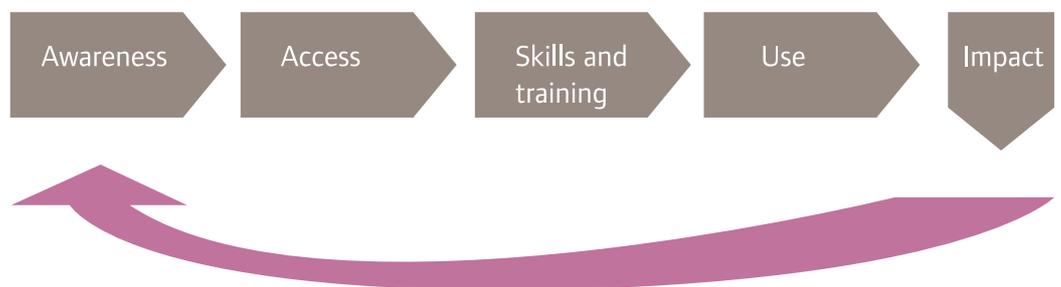
Christie and Perry (1997) suggested that the characteristics of social exclusion, such as non-participation in economic and social activities, isolation and a perceived lack of opportunity can be exacerbated through a lack of information and communication. Others (Phipps, 2000) have noted that whilst lack of access to ICT is not the cause of social exclusion it does have the potential to exclude individuals and groups. However, Gibbs (2001) notes that the economic and social implications of ICT are complex and frequently contradictory.

Little research has been found that examines access and use of ICTs by the wide variety of socially excluded groups that exist in the UK. This research has rarely examined whether access to ICT helps to overcome social exclusion, or conversely, whether a lack of access to ICT enhances disadvantage and exclusion.

If ICT policies are to support effectively policies addressing social exclusion much more needs to be understood about the role of ICT in the lives of socially excluded individuals and communities. This study investigates many of these important issues and provides a better understanding of the role of the ICT in the lives of socially excluded groups.

This research is one of the first to investigate the uptake and impact of ICT amongst socially excluded groups. The study was founded on a research framework (see Figure 9.1) that reflects the way socially excluded groups consider and use the Internet. It is also a useful framework to enable policymakers to consider intervention at each stage of the adoption framework.

Figure 9.1 The research framework



This concluding chapter uses the research framework to highlight the key results from the research. It also draws together the recommendations for further research and policy that were presented in earlier chapters.

9.2 Awareness

ONS reports have suggested considerable lack of interest in the Internet amongst non-users. The broad extent of these views was not evident in this study. A notable observation from this study of socially excluded groups was the curiosity nearly all users had about the Internet before they started to use it. This relatively high level of curiosity is matched by the sense of achievement when some of the basic skills have been acquired and confidence in Internet use increases. This sense of achievement and satisfaction appears to increase with age or degree of social inclusion.

Higher levels of satisfaction were particularly evident amongst elderly people and those that had not previously used computers.

policy recommendation 1: Promote Curiosity

Campaigns to raise curiosity and awareness of the Internet should be developed. These campaigns should be accompanied by 'try IT' types of events to promote confidence and skills in ICT use at a public access points.

The route to obtaining home Internet access for many participants in this study was a two stage process.

The first stage was the decision to try the Internet at a public access point, in a community group or other location. This initial 'trial' period frequently at online centres often lasted several months. Only 26 per cent of participants in this study using the Internet for less than twelve months had access from home. This initial stage is stimulated by new users' curiosity and their understanding, usually from friends or the media that "somehow the Internet will be beneficial or useful to them".

The second and usually later stage of the process; purchase of a computer for home, appears to be made on predominantly economic grounds. At this point curiosity is less of an influence and better understanding of the benefits of Internet use and the real costs of getting online are more important.

There is probably an important role for public access points to play in highlighting the benefits of Internet use and clarifying how cheaply computing equipment and Internet access can be acquired. There was a considerable misconception amongst many non-users about the costs of purchasing computing equipment and the expenses incurred for Internet access. Many non-users estimated these costs to be more than twice the real cost incurred by the new socially excluded Internet users in this study.

policy recommendation 2: An Extended Role for Online Centres

Public access points and online centres should provide more details to users about the costs of home Internet use and the benefits that can arise for 'people like you'. Socially excluded groups will then be able to make better informed decisions after a trial period of Internet use.

9.3 Access

The use of online centres and public access points by socially excluded groups in this study was high, even amongst those that had home Internet access. 40 per cent of the 94 socially excluded Internet users in this study used libraries for Internet access and only 43 per cent had access from home. There are probably two key reasons for the relatively high levels of public access point use. The first is probably a desire to minimise access costs. The second is the low level of Internet access at work provided to socially excluded groups. Only six per cent had Internet access at work compared with 38 per cent for all UK Internet users found by an ONS study.

Use of computers amongst socially excluded groups at work is limited. There is also evidence that employer investment in wider learning has been in decline in the UK over the last three to four years.

policy recommendation 3: Widen Access at Work

Initiatives to encourage employers to broaden access to the Internet and ICT training in the workplace on a regular basis or through 'Try IT' style initiatives should be introduced, particularly in localities or amongst firms that have a high proportion of socially excluded workers.

This study has shown for the first time that online centres play a very important role in assisting socially excluded groups to get online. To investigate this area further one of the focus group sessions was convened with fourteen online centre managers. These very stimulating discussions highlighted a number of do's and don'ts that online centres should consider in developing the activities and use of their centres. These could be developed further and circulated more widely to ICT centres

Whilst 'small is beautiful' and 'local is beneficial' a lack of scale or size has left some online centres with too few resources to develop their activities more fully or even to provide their current services at the level that users require. Alliances might be beneficial or centres could be supported through an online public access point resource centre.

policy recommendation 4: A Public Access Resource Centre

A resource centre to enhance and support the development of online centres and public access points in London should be developed. The Centre should provide shared access to resources such as staff training, mentoring, equipment and the development of an information and good practice exchange programme.

policy recommendation 5: A Network for Good Practice

As a first step towards developing good practice and identifying what a resource centre might provide, a London-wide conference should be organised to share the results of this study and to develop new approaches to encouraging Internet use amongst socially excluded groups. This could become a regular event or lead to a series of smaller workshops at the sub-regional level.

9.4 Skills and training

Many participants expressed the need to have a 'helping hand' or 'someone on tap' to assist them when they encountered problems using the Internet. There are many facets to social exclusion, one dimension is reduced social cohesion and there is evidence that some groups, particularly the elderly do not have access to a wide range of friends or other support to overcome computing problems. Current solutions to this problem focus on assistance provided at online centres. It would also be useful to provide this type of general help and support for socially excluded groups online or over the telephone.

Many participants complained about the bewildering array of Internet training and skills development courses offered by ICT centres and learning centres. This confusion led to uncertainty about which courses were most suitable for them.

The Public Access Resource Centre, recommendation four on the previous page, could play a valuable role in collecting information about ICT courses and categorising and presenting them in a common, more easily understood format. Criteria for categorisation would need to be investigated further with socially excluded groups, but it might consider elements such as user's existing skill level, topic for course focus, style of delivery (e.g. sit-down formal, drop in class) and other factors.

policy recommendation 6: ICT Help and Training Information

A help desk providing online or telephone assistance to help socially excluded groups overcome computing and Internet problems should be established alongside the London online public access point resource centre suggested in the previous chapter. The centre should also provide information about the location of online centres and ICT training and skills development opportunities.

A large proportion of Chapter six focussed on the development of formal mechanisms to develop Internet skills. However, it was also highlighted that more assistance could also be provided to encourage and support the development of informal Internet support groups by community associations or neighbourhood groups. The desire of many new Internet users to volunteer and assist others was highlighted during discussions with ICT centre managers. Neighbourhood support has the advantage of understanding local needs and providing role models to demonstrate the advantages of ICT.

policy recommendation 7: Neighbourhood ICT support

Community associations or neighbourhood organisations should be supported and encouraged to develop informal Internet help groups.

Participants and online centre managers highlighted that people are often happy to say they cannot use ICT, but they are less happy at stating they lack basic literacy skills. New users gain a considerable sense of achievement from mastering basic computer and Internet concepts. This pleasure appears to increase with age or degree of social exclusion. For some participants, particularly those with poor basic literacy skills, using the Internet and developing computing skills were a stimulus to start learning again or improving literacy. Several managers felt this opportunity was often not given enough recognition. Better communication and liaison between online centres and neighbourhood learning centres should be encouraged to enhance this opportunity.

Commentators have also observed that there is a growing reliance on ICT as an aid to learning. Considerable additional benefits in promoting literacy and skills development and perhaps economies of scale could arise from closer liaison and/or co-location of online centres with neighbourhood learning centres.

policy recommendation 8: Enhance the Stimulus for Learning

Internet skills development and training can act as stimulus to start learning again. Better liaison between online centres and neighbourhood learning centres should be encouraged to ensure this opportunity is promoted and made available to socially excluded groups.

Rekindling a desire to learn exemplifies one of the wider opportunities stimulated by using the Internet. Trying to investigate the extent and nature of this impact also epitomises the difficulties of assessing whether Internet access only helps at the margins or whether in combination with other initiatives it might be effective in addressing some of the core issues associated with social exclusion.

Developing Internet skills may not lead directly to employment or any other quantifiable output. But recommencing learning for many socially excluded groups can help them move on and overcome some aspects of social exclusion.

research recommendation 1: Direct and Indirect ICT impact

Research is required to investigate the wider opportunities offered by the Internet and Internet skills development that assist socially excluded groups to overcome some aspects of social exclusion.

9.5 ICT use

This study provides the first detailed comparison of the use of the Internet by socially excluded groups with all UK Internet users. It is evident that as socially excluded users' Internet skills and confidence develop they make greater use of the Internet for email and for accessing online information than the general UK population. The small sample size for this study (130 participants) restricts the robustness with which these results can be said to be representative of all socially excluded groups. However, they do provide the first investigation of this topic and feedback from ICT managers suggests they are a good reflection of the characteristics and activities of their online centres users.

research recommendation 2: ICT Use and Impact Research

To ensure the robustness of the results and recommendations from this study further research into the use and impact of ICT amongst a wider group of socially excluded users should be undertaken. The research should use the current proven methodology, but additional research should be undertaken to assist the evaluation and development of recommendations, such as help desks, neighbourhood support and ICT at work initiatives, suggested in this report.

Email use amongst the socially excluded participants (89 per cent used email) in this study was higher than the level found in an ONS study of all UK users (72 per cent). Email was valued as a quick and cheap method of communication. Email provided the ability to stay in touch with friends and family in the UK and overseas at a fraction of the cost required to communicate by telephone. This was particularly important to racial or ethnic groups with strong overseas ties. For elderly and disabled groups email was particularly useful for reducing feelings of isolation, it also enhanced their ability to participate more widely in society.

Comparison of the use of online information by the socially excluded groups in this study with the overall UK population (found through ONS studies undertaken at the same time) provides some interesting results.

The socially excluded participants in this study make far higher use of the Internet than the UK population for all information seeking and online interactive activities, except those that require monetary transactions (i.e. shopping and banking). The topic most frequently investigated by the users in this study was training and educational information. Use of this information was considerably higher by socially excluded Internet users (63 per cent) than by the UK population (ONS study 40 per cent). Job opportunity information (socially excluded 41 per cent, ONS 24 per cent)

and government information (socially excluded 42 per cent, ONS 17 per cent) also had significantly higher levels of use. The second most popular topic investigated by the users in this study was healthcare information, 51 per cent of socially excluded users required this information. The ONS collect statistics on 14 online activities but regrettably healthcare is not investigated. This information was particularly useful to older people and disabled groups.

A methodology was developed in this study to investigate how the use of the Internet by socially excluded participants compares with the information requirements of socially excluded non-users. This investigation helped to find the real level of information use online by standardising access against the topics that are relevant to the interests of socially excluded groups. This method helped to overcome spurious comparisons that might have been made by comparing Internet information use for socially excluded groups with all UK Internet users. For example it is well known that socially excluded groups seek more medical advice and benefits information than the general UK population.

Using this standardisation methodology it was evident that higher than expected use was made of online information about all topics except one. This one exception was benefits information, this was sought by 36 per cent of Internet non-users in the last year, but it was only accessed by 23 per cent of Internet users in the last year. This low level of access to information that is thought to be directly useful to socially excluded groups to enhance their circumstances is disappointing. Poor usage levels confirm the views of focus group participants that online benefits systems are generally difficult and unfriendly to use.

policy recommendation 9: Online Benefits Information

Disappointment was expressed by many socially excluded groups about the usability and assistance provided by online benefits systems. There appears to be considerable room for improvement.

Use of government web sites was higher amongst the socially excluded groups in this study (42 per cent) than amongst the UK population (17 per cent). But our methodology to investigate the real level of use of information relevant to socially excluded groups (through comparison of information use amongst a peer group of Internet non-users) found that whilst use of online government information appears to be high Internet access has not increased the level of use of to the same extent as other topics investigated

The topic with the highest added utility (or standardised level of use) are

job opportunities information (sought by 1 per cent of Internet non-users in the last year, accessed by 41 per cent of Internet users), training and education information (sought by 29 per cent of non-users, accessed by 63 per cent of users) and healthcare information (sought by 21 per cent of non-users, accessed by 51 per cent of users).

If the level of use of online information is used as a surrogate for beneficial impact amongst socially excluded groups it is apparent that the Internet is not just providing wider opportunities. These opportunities are actively being seized by all socially excluded groups. Access to most types of information by the socially excluded Internet users in this study exceeds the level observed by the ONS in national studies and the level of information sought by their peer group of Internet non-users in the last year.

News and information sought by participants was predominantly national or international. Local online information was generally regarded as poor. Local newspapers, notice boards, libraries and one-stop-shops were thought to be better sources for local information. If the Internet is a conduit to overcoming social exclusion it is probable that information about local and national opportunities and initiatives will be required. At present the provision of local information appears to be poor in many areas.

Local and regional government organisations will have to address this perception of the quality of local news and information web sites if they are keen to enhance levels of access to local information online.

9.6 ICT impact

Commentators have suggested that some characteristics of social exclusion, such as non-participation in economic and social activities, isolation and a perceived lack of opportunity can be exacerbated through a lack of information and communication.

This study has, for the first time, investigated the impact of ICT on socially excluded groups. This analysis has shown that Internet access can enhance participation, reduce isolation and access to information can provide an entrée to wider opportunities. These benefits should help to overcome some aspect of social exclusion. However, the limited scope of this study makes it impossible to know if these benefits only help at the margins or whether they might be effective in addressing some of the core issues associated with social exclusion.

The policy intervention framework used throughout this study highlights the need to identify clearly the impact of the Internet so that these

benefits can be used as catalysts to raise Internet awareness. It is important that benefits are carefully targeted for specific socially excluded groups. Different benefits from Internet use arise for different socially excluded groups. This is best exemplified by the way the Internet can enhance communication and reduce the isolation suffered by many elderly and disabled groups. However a common core of benefits or impacts is also evident.

policy recommendation 10: Careful Targeting for Promotions

A core set of benefits and impacts is evident for nearly all Internet users. However, the benefits and impact of ICT use are not the same for all socially excluded groups. Care is required to ensure the benefits of Internet use promoted during campaigns are relevant to the target audience.

The simplest method to investigate the impact of the Internet on socially excluded groups was to investigate whether or not they felt it was 'worth it'. The average cost new users pay for Internet access in their first year was £143. It appears that this investment or the benefit derived from Internet access must be considered worthwhile because in later years their peer group (often present in the same focus group session) are willing to spend more for better online access or to be able to spend more time online. Indeed, there was a consensus in many focus group sessions that the costs of using the Internet were almost completely outweighed by the advantages of being able to get the information they wanted.

A simple method of analysing internet impact was developed during the study. It is acknowledged that this approach is relatively simple. However, it does, for the first time, provide monetary and time values for the cost and impact of Internet amongst socially excluded groups. The method investigates inputs in terms of the effort or time consumed and gained through Internet access. Outputs were measured by the monetary value spent and saved through Internet use.

Inputs were measured in terms of time spent using the Internet minus the time savings obtained from the Internet. The average time spent online by all users was 6.2 hours per week. The average time saved by using the Internet to collect information, by online shopping and by quicker communication was 3.5 hours a week. Net time benefits are greatest for new Internet users. This group on average spend 4.2 hours online each week, but they save 3.2 hours, so their net time cost was one hour.

Outputs were measured by the monetary value of savings from using the Internet for online shopping and communication minus Internet access costs. Average Internet access costs were £165 a year. The average saving

on online shopping and communication was £169. Thus use of the Internet had a net benefit or credit of £4. Participants that had been using the Internet for four years or more estimated that they saved on average £268 per year.

9.7 Conclusion

This project has achieved the objectives established in the research. These were to:-

- Study the factors that influence the adoption and use of the Internet by socially excluded groups.
- Identify any tangible economic or social benefits arising from having access and making use of the Internet.
- Identify policy areas or future action concerning the targeting of resources and the design and likely success of current interventions.
- Identify avenues for future research.

The emphasis of most Internet strategies, policies or projects concerned with social exclusion falls into two main groups, initiatives or policies that:

- Provide equality of opportunity
- Address the causes of social exclusion

Most Internet initiatives fall into the first group and are targeted at the socially excluded, aiming to provide them with the same level of access to information, services or opportunity as people that are not socially excluded.

Many definitions of social exclusion highlight non-participation in economic and social activities, isolation and a perceived lack of opportunity. Lack of participation or isolation or lack of opportunity can be exacerbated for many socially excluded groups through a lack of access to ICTs and the Internet. Whilst lack of access to ICT is not the cause of social exclusion, it has the potential to further exclude individuals and groups. As a result many initiatives aim to provide equality of Internet access to socially excluded groups.

The second group of Internet oriented policies are more ambitious; at the outset these policies aim to overcome the causes of social exclusion. They address the reasons for social exclusion and provide targeted groups or individuals with the opportunity through the Internet to participate more effectively in economic and social activities. Examples of this type of policy are initiatives that provide training and skills development to

enhance computing skills (or overcome basic literacy deficiencies) and enable socially excluded groups to find employment.

There are clear differences between the goals of the two types of project, but there is also significant and obvious overlap. Policies or projects that provide equality of opportunity can assist in overcoming the causes of social exclusion. However, since the activities required to achieve either of the two goals are significantly different, policymakers need to be clear at the outset about the emphasis and goals of their Internet policies or projects.

Most of this chapter has focussed on the benefits and impact of obtaining access to the Internet. This research project has shown that some clear and quantifiable benefits can arise from Internet access by socially excluded groups. However, even if these benefits had not been found, it is also important to consider what might happen if socially excluded groups do not have access to the Internet.

Many definitions of social exclusion highlight non-participation in economic and social activities, isolation and a perceived lack of opportunity. This study has shown that a lack of participation or isolation or lack of opportunity can be exacerbated for many socially excluded groups through a lack of access to ICTs and the Internet. Whilst lack of access to ICT is not the cause of social exclusion, it has the potential to further exclude individuals and groups. This view was perfectly expressed by one relatively unimpressed socially excluded Internet user.

“There is no huge benefit if you learn how to use computers and the Internet. However, if you don’t learn you are behind socially.”

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Questionnaires

Internet Non-users

Have you ever used the Internet?

No continue on this page

Yes turnover and continue

Have you ever used a computer? **Yes**

No

What is the main reason why you have not used the Internet?

Do not have a computer **Yes** **No**

cannot afford it **Yes** **No**

Do not have Internet access **Yes** **No**

No time to use the Internet **Yes** **No**

Lack of skills **Yes** **No**

Not interested **Yes** **No**

Lack of confidence **Yes** **No**

No need to use it **Yes** **No**

Have you ever wanted to try the Internet?

Yes

No

If you had wanted to try the Internet what stopped you trying?

No where to try the Internet **Yes** **No**

Lack of skills or confidence **Yes** **No**

No one to help me **Yes** **No**

No time to use the Internet **Yes** **No**

Would you be interested in receiving information about online centres where people could help you could try the Internet ? **Yes** **No**

Would you be interested in receiving help or training to improve your computing skills? **Yes** **No**

How important do you think it is to be able to use computers for life in general?

Very Important

Important

Not important

Very unimportant

Don't Know

How much do you estimate it costs people like you to use the Internet each month? £

Taking account of the cheaper prices for online goods and services how much do you think you might save by using the Internet?

£per year

Have you required information on any of the following topics in the last year?

Benefits information	Yes	No
Information on job opportunities	Yes	No
Health information	Yes	No
Information on training/learning	Yes	No
Information on local events	Yes	No
Distance learning from home	Yes	No
Childcare information	Yes	No
Council Information	Yes	No

What one thing that you have heard about the Internet might encourage you to use it?

.....

Gender	Male	Female			
AGE	under 20	20-30	31-40	41-50	51-60
	61-70	71-80	over 80		

appendix 2

Online Shopping	Yes	No
Entertainment	Yes	No
Online Banking	Yes	No
Creating web pages	Yes	No
Online Gambling	Yes	No
Accessing government information	Yes	No

Since you started using the Internet for collecting information or for online shopping and communication how much time do you think you have saved a week?hours

Taking account of the cheaper prices for online goods and services how much do you think you might have saved by using the Internet in the last year? £per year

If the Internet was to disappear tomorrow what would you miss most
.....

Gender	Male	Female			
AGE	under 20	20-30	31-40	41-50	51-60
	61-70	71-80	over 80		

Summary of recommendations

Policy recommendations

Policy Recommendation 1 – Promote Curiosity

Campaigns to raise curiosity and awareness of the Internet should be developed. These campaigns should be accompanied by 'try IT' types of events to promote confidence and skills in ICT use at a public access points.

Policy Recommendation 2 – An Extended Role for Online Centres

Public access points and online centres should provide more details to users about the costs of home Internet use and the benefits that can arise for 'people like you'. Socially excluded groups will then be able to make better informed decisions after a trial period of Internet use.

Policy Recommendation 3 – Widen Access at Work

Initiatives to encourage employers to broaden access to the Internet and ICT training in the workplace on a regular basis or through 'Try IT' style initiatives should be introduced, particularly in localities or amongst firms that have a high proportion of socially excluded workers.

Policy Recommendation 4 – A Public Access Resource Centre

A resource centre to enhance and support the development of online centres and public access points in London should be developed. The Centre should provide shared access to resources such as staff training, mentoring, equipment and the development of an information and good practice exchange programme.

Policy Recommendation 5 – A Network for Good Practice

As a first step towards developing good practice and identifying what a resource centre might provide, a London-wide conference should be organised to share the results of this study and to develop new approaches to encouraging Internet use amongst socially excluded groups. This could become a regular event or lead to a series of smaller workshops at the sub-regional level.

Policy Recommendation 6 – ICT Help and Training Information

A help desk providing online or telephone assistance to help socially excluded groups overcome computing and Internet problems should be established alongside the London online public access point resource centre suggested in the previous chapter. The centre should also provide information about the location of online centres and ICT training and skills development opportunities.

Policy Recommendation 7 – Neighbourhood ICT support

Community associations or neighbourhood organisations should be supported and encouraged to develop informal Internet help groups.

Policy Recommendation 8 – Enhance the Stimulus for Learning

Internet skills development and training can act as stimulus to start learning again. Better liaison between online centres and neighbourhood learning centres should be encouraged to ensure this opportunity is promoted and made available to socially excluded groups.

Policy Recommendation 9 – Online Benefits Information

Disappointment was expressed by many socially excluded groups about the usability and assistance provided by online benefits systems. There appears to be considerable room for improvement.

Policy Recommendation 10 – Careful Targeting for Promotions

A core set of benefits and impacts is evident for nearly all Internet users. However, the benefits and impact of ICT use are not the same for all socially excluded groups. Care is required to ensure the benefits of Internet use promoted during campaigns are relevant to the target audience.

Research recommendations

Research Recommendation 1 – Direct and Indirect ICT impact

Research is required to investigate the wider opportunities offered by the Internet and Internet skills development that assist socially excluded groups to overcome some aspects of social exclusion.

Research Recommendation 2 – ICT Use and Impact Research

To ensure the robustness of the results and recommendations from this study further research into the use and impact of ICT amongst a wider group of socially excluded users should be undertaken. The research should use the current proven methodology, but additional research should be undertaken to assist the evaluation and development of recommendations, such as help desks, neighbourhood support and ICT at work initiatives, suggested in this report.

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中文

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Vietnamese

Tiếng Việt

Nếu bạn muốn bản sao của tài liệu này bằng
ngôn ngữ của bạn, hãy gọi điện theo số hoặc
liên lạc với địa chỉ dưới đây.

Greek

Αν θα θέλατε ένα αντίγραφο του
παρόντος εγγράφου στη γλώσσα
σας, παρακαλώ να τηλεφωνήσετε
στον αριθμό ή να επικοινωνήσετε
στην παρακάτω διεύθυνση.

Turkish

Bize telefon ederek ya da yukarıdaki
adrese başvurarak bu belgenin
Türkçe'sini isteyebilirsiniz.

Punjabi

ਜੇ ਕੋਈ ਇਸ ਦਸਤਾਵੇਜ਼ ਦੀ ਕਾਪੀ ਆਪਣੀ ਮਾਤਾ
ਬੋਲੀ ਵਿੱਚ ਚਾਹੁੰਦਾ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਉਸਦੇ ਨਾਮ
ਲਿਖ ਕੇ ਇਸ ਸੰਬੰਧ ਵਿੱਚ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

Hindi

यदि आप इस दस्तावेज़ की प्रति अपनी भाषा में चाहते हैं,
तो कृपया निम्नलिखित नम्बर पर फोन करें अथवा दिये
गये पता पर सम्पर्क करें।

Bengali

আপনি যদি আপনার ভাষায় এই দলিলের প্রতিলিপি
(কপি) চান, তা হলে নীচের ফোন নম্বরে
বা ঠিকানায় অনুগ্রহ করে যোগাযোগ করুন।

Urdu

اگر آپ اس دستاویز کی نقل اپنی زبان میں چاہتے
ہیں، تو براہ کرم نیچے دیئے گئے نمبر پر فون کریں
یا دیئے گئے پتے پر رابطہ قائم کریں۔

Arabic

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