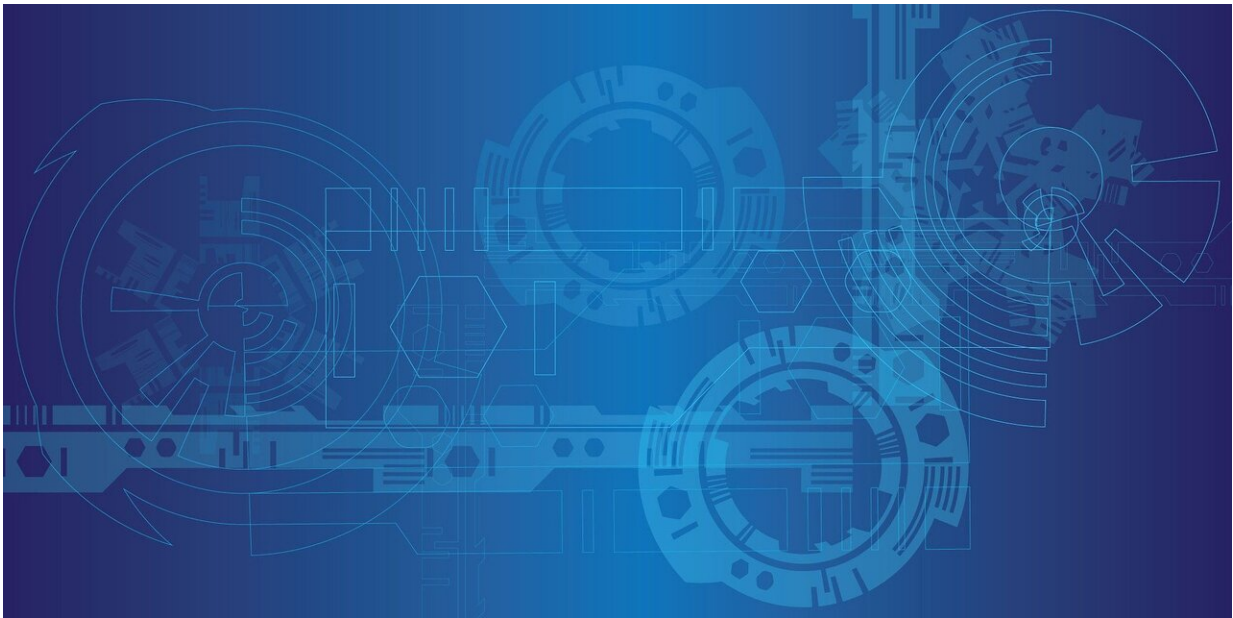


Research uncovers 'digital poverty' across North West's rural communities

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A new study by researchers at Lancaster University reveals 28% of the population in North West England are not confident completing key tasks online, such as applying for a job or making an online call. Most alarmingly, over half of those aged 65 and above and those on lower incomes lack digital skills, meaning those most in need of online services are least likely to be able to access them.

The research features in a new Work Foundation policy briefing, published today, and is based on a survey of more than 500 people living in rural communities in the North West between February and March 2022, as well as 16 in-depth interviews.

It finds that while 95% of residents have access to the internet, only a quarter feel able to make the most of it. A significant proportion of people lack digital confidence, and risk missing out on key services and employment opportunities. In particular, 26% of rural residents are not confident in applying for jobs online, and 23% are unable to confidently make video calls via Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

To get around the problem, one in five say they would have to ask family or friends for help—which was a particular problem for older participants and those on lower incomes.

Ben Harrison, Director of the Work Foundation, said: "It is clear that for those in the rural North West a lack of digital confidence and skills are bigger barriers to accessing key services and employment opportunities than internet connectivity.

"Given the seismic shift to remote and hybrid working we've seen since the beginning of the pandemic, it is alarming that such a high proportion of the rural population still really struggle with these skills—especially older residents and low earners who are most likely to benefit from accessing digital services."

The North West is also one of the lowest performing regions in terms of closing the digital divide. While Government set out an ambition in its 2014 Digital Inclusion Strategy to reduce the number of people offline by 25% every two years, the North West only achieved a 15.4% reduction rate between 2017-2019—ranking ninth out of twelve UK regions.

Affordability remains a significant issue for many. 19% of the sample found either their PC, home broadband, a smartphone headset or mobile data unaffordable, rising to 36% among households with an income of £20,000 or less. 13% said they have poor quality or no Wi-Fi, and 1 in 5 have no mobile broadband.

"It was concerning to hear in our interviews that low levels of consumer confidence and technical understanding can result in people committing to costly and sub-optimal contracts, that they are then tied in to," Ben Harrison adds. "For example, we heard of instances where people were tied into contracts but unable to get any reliable connectivity at home— so felt they had to take out another contract at the same time, facing huge costs.

"People living in rural areas also tend to face higher costs for fast broadband connectivity, which can be enough to deter some from engaging with the online world completely and this could worsen as families struggle to make ends meet during the cost of living crisis. If Government ambitions to Level Up the UK are to become a reality, clearly more needs to be done to provide people living in the rural North West with the digital skills and access they need."

The Work Foundation briefings set out a series of recommendations for local authorities and Government. These include calls for:

- Ofcom to ensure providers openly disclose the full range of charges included within mobile or broadband packages and ensure this information reaches vulnerable consumers in clearly understandable terms
- Help to ensure claimants of Universal Credit know they may be eligible for social tariffs which allow individuals to benefit from broadband connection at a reduced cost
- Job search platforms, recruiters and local bodies such as councils

and LEPs to work in partnership to build confidence among rural residents in searching and applying for jobs online, through outreach activities in local settings and at home

- Local authorities to provide educational outreach to rural residents at the greatest risk of digital poverty, to equip them with the key skills needed to search and apply for jobs online
- Local authorities to collaborate with third parties to undertake peer-to-peer outreach to boost confidence in accessing digital services, using intermediaries and trusted individuals and via accessible community settings

More information: The full briefings are available on the Work Foundation website: www.theworkfoundation.com

Provided by Lancaster University

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