

Meeting of the Cross Party Group on Consumer Rights

25th of October 2023 - Held via Teams

In attendance

Sioned Williams (SW)	Member of the Senedd, Chair
Nick Speed (NS)	BT Group
Helen Burrows (HB)	BT Group
Dewi John (DJ)	Older People's Commissioner for Wales
Nicola Evans (NE)	Older People's Commissioner for Wales
David Beer (DB)	Transport Focus
Jess Tye	Advertising Standards Authority
Sian Jones	
Andrew White	Consumer Council for Water
Luke Young (LY)	Assistant Director, Citizens Advice Wales
Anwen Jones	Citizens Advice Cymru

Introduction

Sioned Williams MS, Chair, introduced the topic of the meeting which was digital inclusion and social tariffs.

Helen Burrows, BT Group, Policy Director opened the discussion outlining the ongoing work of BT Group in this field such as online safety, prevention of fraud and the future of content delivery. **HB** explained the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the importance of digital inclusion as half of those advised to isolate did not have access to broadband. **HB** highlighted that the BT Group is aware that the drivers of digital inclusion are not well understood, noting that 90% of UK households have broadband access, however some of the 10% that do not have broadband can be quite stubborn.

HB expressed the need for targeted support to encourage households who are not connected to get connected. She shared a report that looked into the group of households who can't afford connectivity (based on the household income levels), which found that a million people across the UK cannot afford connectivity after paying for essential household services.

In addition, there is a generational issue as the older consumers are the less likely they are to be online. **HB** emphasised the need for one to one and frequent support to help the specific personal needs of the elderly when it comes to digital skills. She expressed the need for better coordination from the government to ensure high quality support is provided for the excluded group.

SW asked whether BT Group has had discussions with other companies or the Welsh

Government on this. Nick Speed stated that BT has had discussions on the transformation in the health service and talking to the NHS in all of the home nations, with ongoing discussions on the digitalisation of the health service, improving diagnostics and prevention.

LY noted that what Citizens Advice Wales is seeing concurs with what Helen Burrows had alluded to. He asked whether BT believed that broadband should be considered as a single unified social tariff. **HB** stated that it is the responsibility of the government.

HB stated that the BT Group feel that as an industry there is a difference between the communications and other utility services. She added that connectivity is increasingly important and plays an integral role in improving people's lives. **HB** appreciated the fact that broadband access is not as essential as food and water as you can manage without it.

SW expressed concerns regarding the Discretionary Assistance Fund and how it is sometimes difficult and confusing for people to apply for if they are mainly online applications.

DJ referred to a recent call of evidence conducted by the Older People's Commissioner of people's experience of digital inclusion. He added that in March 2023, a survey of older people in Wales who had access to different services and digital skills found that 63% over the age of 60 years old had access.

Socially excluded people do not have a smartphone or broadband, therefore they are unable to access parking apps or train tickets. Additionally, some people do not wish to have a smartphone. He added that due to the cost of living, 64% said that they were cutting back on their spending including on phones and wifi spending.

DJ emphasised the importance of empowering older people who want to go online to do so, and to support and upskill them to use the technologies. He also emphasised the importance of recognising and respecting that some people are opposed to it and ensuring that they have an alternative option. **NE** stated that more and more people are contacting the Older People's Commissioner's office regarding support to gain more skills for using services online.

SW asked if there are codes of practice in place and whether they are being enforced and if the same standards are provided online and offline. **NS** highlighted that Wales is the only home nation that has a Centre for Public Digital Service to ensure that these groups don't get disenfranchised.

DB raised concerns regarding the ability of people accessing services that require a mobile ticket but are not connected digitally, raising the need for provision in the industry for those not connected. **DB** also referred to the legislation coming through the Senedd in the early part of next year (2024) on bus franchising. He expressed the need for a roadmap of this legislation and for it to ensure that those who aren't connected to be able to access offers and transport in the same way other people can.

SW questioned whether the Welsh Government can take action to upskill those who aren't confident digitally. **HB** agreed and noted that more needs to be done in joining up and coordinating the support as "digitising is an unstoppable tide". She mentioned that testing out support to find what works and what doesn't that can then be scaled up to reach more people. **NS** highlighted that Digital Communities Wales provides a good basis to work on as they spot the gaps in terms of access.

DJ agreed, noting that young people can navigate poor websites or apps better compared to older people who find it more difficult. He emphasised the impact of this on the wellbeing of older people as their access is limited.

SW put on record her deepest condolences, on behalf of the group, for the loss of Alun Evans from Citizens Advice Cymru and said her thoughts are with the family and friends at this difficult time. She closed the meeting and thanked members for their attendance and contributions and ended the meeting.