Citizens Advice Croydon's clients' access to computers and the internet

Executive Summary

The policies and practices that affect people's lives increasingly involve the internet – jobs are applied for on-line, tax returns are made on line, changes to benefits are notified on line – the list goes on. Citizens Advice Croydon are concerned that many of the people who come to us for advice about their problems have difficulties accessing the internet or recording their on-line activities for future reference. To investigate the extent of these difficulties, around 200 of our clients were given a short survey while they were waiting to see our advisers and assessors. About a quarter of the people we surveyed did not consider they had ready access to the internet and, of those who did have easy access, over half did not find it easy to save or print what they had done for future reference. This suggests that a quarter of the people who come to our bureau will struggle to fill in forms on line while access restricted to smart-phones and tablets makes the production of quality job applications and CVs much harder.

As well as being concerned about whether or not our clients could access the internet, we wanted to learn more about whether our clients had access to devices which allowed formatting, saving and printing – almost essential when preparing CVs for job applications, completing tax returns, benefit applications and so forth – and whether our clients had to rely upon public access computers. We were also interested in why those who did not have ready access to computers and the internet did not have such access so we can work towards improving our clients' lives.

The research was undertaken in the late summer of 2015. A short questionnaire, attached at Annex 1, was handed out to clients in our waiting room who completed it while they were waiting to been seen by our advisers and assessors. We accept that this survey may not be statistically valid – responses from people with good internet skills may be under-represented (because they may be able to access the answers their problems on-line) as will responses from the house or hospital bound or from people whose ability to understand written English. None the less we received 196 useful responses which we believe gives a good indication of the situation for our client base. The responses are discussed below and a Survey Monkey analysis is attached at Annex 2. The research was necessarily limited and did not, for example, investigate whether use of public access computers was considered difficult because of lack of availability, cost or issues specific to an individual client such as wheelchair access or lack of manual dexterity.

Question 1: Do you consider yourself to have ready access to the internet?   Yes/no

One in four of the clients walking through our doors do not consider they have ready access to the internet. The question was deliberately subjective as we were concerned with people's perceptions of ease of access believing that this, in turn, will affect how they can use the internet. One client indicated that they did not have ready access because they did not have a home computer and so had to use public access computers whereas another responded that they had easy access because they could go to an internet café. (It is, of course, possible that mobility issues were behind this divergence of opinion but this was beyond the scope of this research).

Those who believed they had ready access were invited to answer questions 2, 3, and 4 and those who did not believe they had ready access were invited to answer questions 5 and 6.

Question 2   Where do you use the internet?
  a)   At home - often/sometimes/never
  b)   At work - often/sometimes/never
  c)   In a pub/cafe/coffee bar - often/sometimes/never
  d)   In a library - often/sometimes/never
  e)   Other – please specify

Of the 146 people who considered they had easy access to the internet, 90% - 130 people - had access at home and 10% accessed the internet on public access or work computers.

Question 3 Do you use the internet on a
  a) Laptop or pc - often/sometimes/never
  b) Tablet - often/sometimes/never
  c) Smartphone - often/sometimes/never

We were interested in the number of people who did not have access to a desktop or laptop computer because we believed that people without access to a 'traditional' computer would struggle to fill in online forms, format CVs, access certain websites and so forth on a tablet or smartphone. Respondents could indicate more than one device. Our research indicated that some 30% of the people who considered themselves to have ready access to the internet could only do so on a tablet or smartphone.

Question 4 How easy is it for you to save or print what you have done on the computer and internet?
   Usually easy / easy / sometimes possible / difficult / very difficult / impossible

Public bodies are moving towards online only services. For example, income tax returns must either be filled in online and sent off electronically, or downloaded from the internet, printed off and filled in manually. Furthermore, some government services, such as registering premium bonds or being reminded of one's national insurance number, require a form to be downloaded, printed, filled in and sent through the post. People who struggle to print documents will find this very difficult. There is also the issue of not being able to print off a CV, therefore making looking for work a struggle. It can also be difficult to save and

subsequently retrieve information sent to government bodies or employers on smart phones or tablets which can make appealing decisions or recalling exactly what one has said in a job application difficult. Of the 141 people who answered this question less than half said they found it easy or usually easy to save or print what they had done on the internet and a further 24% found it difficult or impossible to print - and this is from the people who considered they had ready access to the internet.

The next questions were answered by those who did not have ready access to the internet.

Question 5 Why do you not have ready access to the internet? Please mark all that apply
   a) *I don't have a computer, tablet or smartphone*
   b) *It's too expensive*
   c) *It's too difficult*
   d) *I'm not interested*
   e) *Someone in my family or a friend does it for me*
   f) *Other – please specify……………………………………*

Of the 50 people who did not have ready access to the internet, 14 said this was because they did not have a computer, smartphone or tablet and 16 thought internet access was too difficult or that they just were not interested. Around half were able to rely on friends or family to access the internet for them. (The survey structure did not allow analysis of the overlap in these responses) This reinforces the earlier point – most people require internet access at home before they consider themselves to have ready access to the internet.

Question 6 Would you be interested in learning how to use the internet
   a) *Yes but lessons are expensive*
   b) *Yes but lessons are not at a convenient time or place*
   c) *No – I'm too old*
   d) *No – I'm just not interested*
   e) *Other – please specify …………………………*

Of the 50 people without ready access to the internet, 19 were interested in learning how to use the internet if suitably priced and located lessons were available. The rest were either not interested or considered they could use the internet if only they had access.

Impact of digital exclusion
The research, although statistically limited, is particularly timely because Universal Credit, which will replace Jobseeker's Allowance, Housing Benefit, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Employment and Support Allowance, and Income Support, will be rolled out across Croydon in 2016. Universal Credit must be applied for and managed on-line – nothing is to be done on paper. As we have said over a quarter of those surveyed felt that that did not have easy access to the internet which suggests that those people will struggle to apply for this new benefit and will find it difficult to undertake the regular real-time required by benefit recipients. The only communication they will receive about their benefit will be by email so they might miss an important message leading to their payments being stopped.

Ben Guindi
December 2015
C:\Documents and Settings\494904\Desktop\CAB digital inclusion research 30 March 2016.docx

Annex 1 the waiting room questionnaire

Computers and the internet
More and more services are being delivered by computers and the internet. Citizens Advice is enthusiastic about this but we are worried that some people find it difficult or even impossible to use the internet. We want to make sure that we can help all our clients in the best possible way and want to know whether this is a problem for you. Would you please be kind enough to fill in this questionnaire to help us.

Please mark all the answers that apply to you

1. Do you consider yourself to have ready access to the internet?   Yes/no

If yes go to question 2, if no go to question 5

2. Where do you use the internet

    a)   At home - often/sometimes/never
    b)   At work - often/sometimes/never
    c)   In a pub/cafe/coffee bar - often/sometimes/never
    d)   In a library - often/sometimes/never
    e)   Other - please specify ……………………………………………………

3. Do you use the internet on a

    a)   Laptop or pc - often/sometimes/never
    b)   Tablet - often/sometimes/never
    c)   Smartphone - often/sometimes/never

4. How easy is it for you to save or print stuff you have done on the internet?

    Usually easy / easy / sometimes possible / difficult / very difficult / impossible

Thank-you

5. Why do you not have ready access to the internet? Please mark all that apply

    a)   I don't have a computer, tablet or smartphone
    b)   It's too expensive
    c)   It's too difficult
    d)   I'm not interested
    e)   Someone in my family or a friend does it for me
    f)   Other – please specify…………………………………….

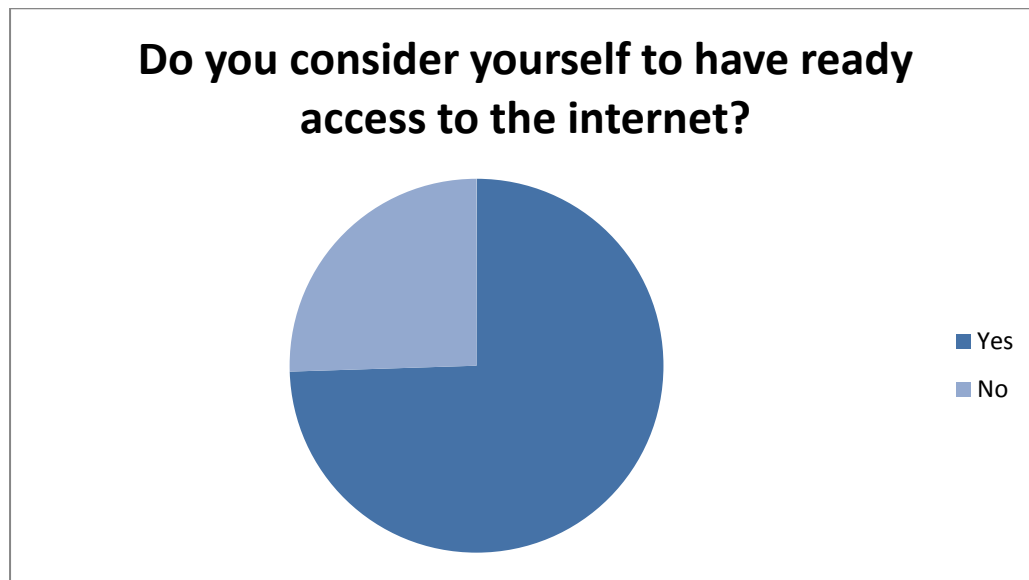6. Would you be interested in learning how to use the internet

    a)   Yes but lessons are expensive
    b)   Yes but lessons are not at a convenient time or place
    c)   No – I'm too old
    d)   No – I'm just not interested
    e)   Other – please specify …………………………
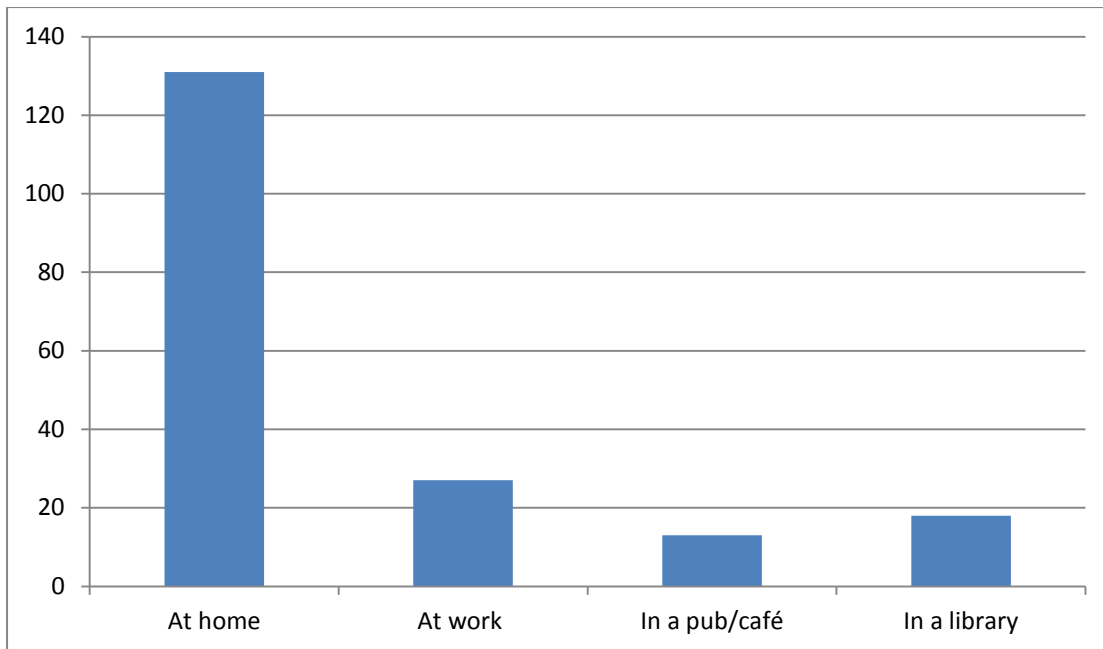
Thank-you

Annex 2. The results

1. Do you consider yourself to have ready access to the internet?
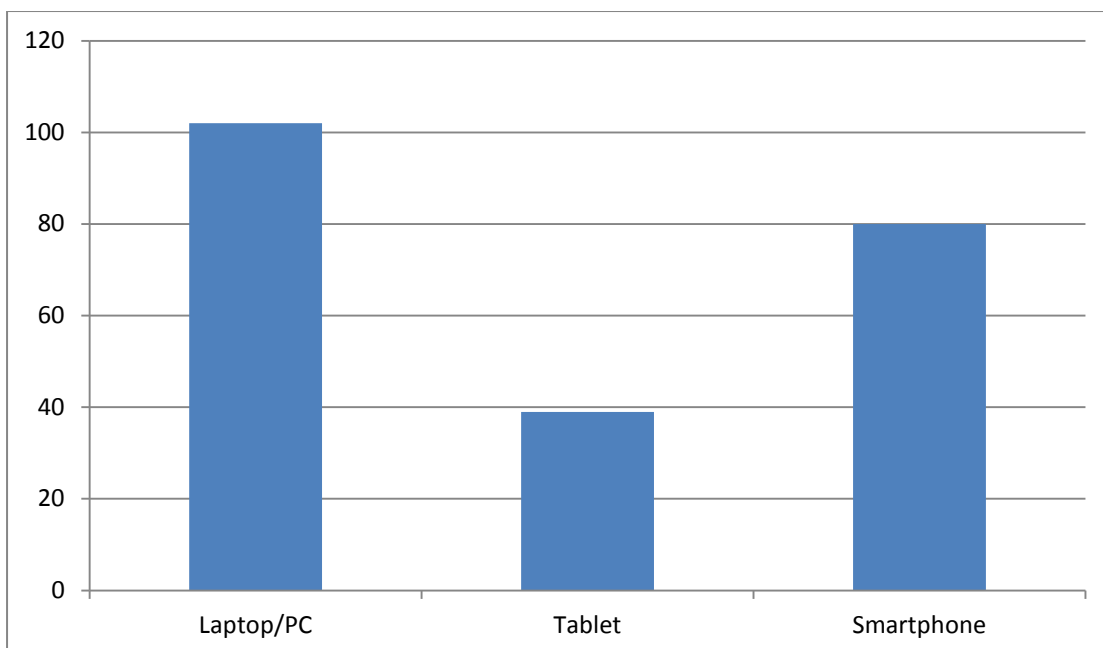
Yes	146	74%
No	50	26%

2. Where do you use the internet?

	Often	Sometimes	Regularity not stated	Total
At home	37	23	71	131
At work	14	6	7	27
In a pub /café /coffee bar	0	7	6	13
In a library	2	10	6	18

3. What device do you use the internet on?

	Often	Sometimes	Regularity not stated	Total
Laptop/PC	31	20	51	102
Tablet	14	15	10	39
Smartphone	30	15	35	80

4. How easy is it for you to save or print stuff you have done on the internet?

Easy	37
Usually easy	28
Sometimes possible	42
Difficult	19
Very difficult	7
Impossible	8
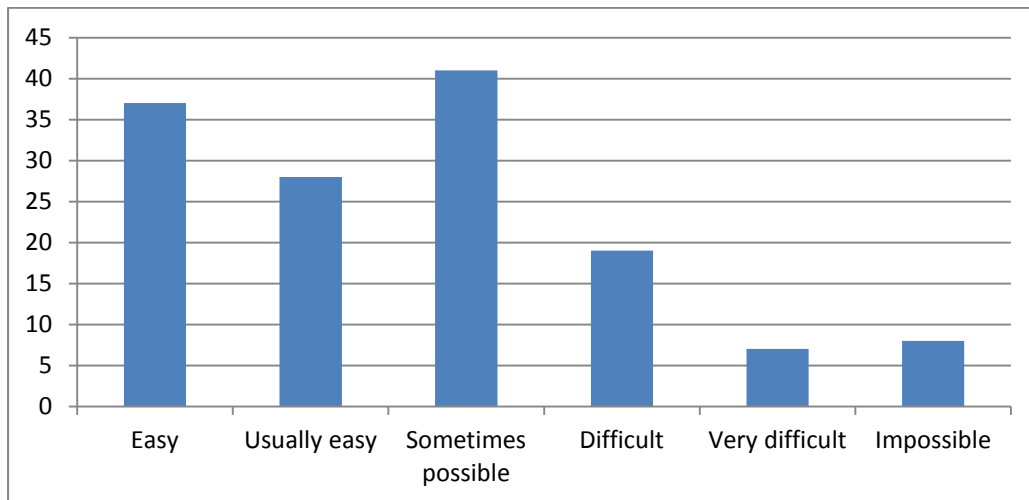
5. Why do you not have ready access to the internet?

I don't have a computer, tablet or smartphone	14
It's too expensive	4
It's too difficult	13
I'm not interested	3
Someone does it for me	20
Other	2
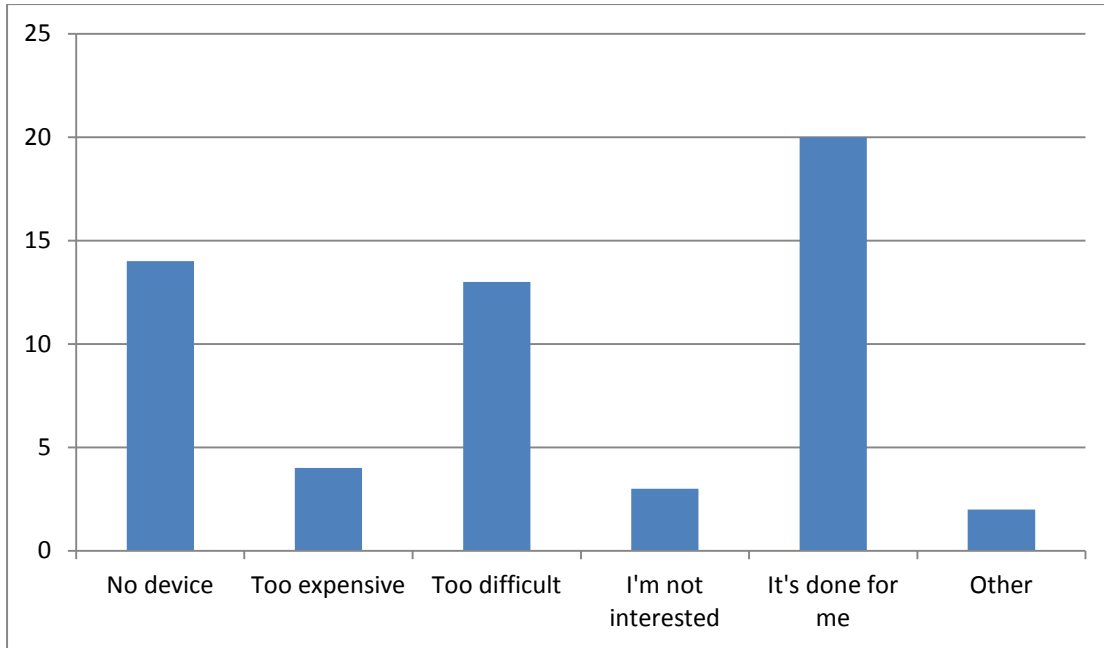
6. Would you be interested in learning how to use the internet?

Yes, but lessons are expensive	18
Yes, but lessons are not convenient	1
No - I'm too old	7
No - I'm just not interested	9
Other	11