

Social housing residents online: The pandemic's impact on digital life



Research report

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Peabody

Peabody is one of the oldest and largest housing associations in London and the South East, established in 1862 by the philanthropist, George Peabody. We're responsible for 67,000 homes in London and the South East, providing quality homes and support services to over 155,000 people. Our mission is to help people make the most of their lives. We do this by providing good quality affordable homes, working with communities, and promoting wellbeing.

The aim of our research programme is to deliver robust research that uses our insight and experience to develop evidence-based arguments on a range of areas impacting our residents, the housing sector and London and the South East as a whole. Our focus is on proposing solutions, not just identifying problems. We use our research both to influence others and stimulate wider debate as well as to challenge ourselves and inform our decisions, services and approach.

Our research was led by our in-house team who provide analytical and research expertise. We also collaborate with a wide range of partners such as universities, think-tanks and other research agencies.

The Covid pandemic has had an enormous impact on all facets of society over the last year. Much of life moved online with advances in online communication and video-calling, allowing many of us to continue most of our normal activities in some capacity. But has this been true of everyone?

At Peabody, we wanted to know how well our residents had been able to adapt to these new ways of living, working and learning. Three years ago, we asked our residents about their internet usage and which activities they engage in online. With the onset of the pandemic, we felt it was an important time to return to this topic and see what has changed.

We surveyed our residents about how they get online, what they do online, and how they felt their use of the internet, or lack thereof, impacted their lives. We will use this insight to ensure our residents have the tools and knowledge necessary to make the most of their lives in the digital world.

Their responses were encouraging. Many of our residents have been able to adapt to the changing ways of living and working suggesting a sharp rise in digital usage. Yet our findings also highlight the increased challenges for those who haven't been able to do so. We found our very oldest residents struggled to get online, and a growing skills gap between those who have been in the workplace over the last year and those who have not. We ask what we could do as their landlord to help to address these gaps and to ensure their needs are met and identify lessons for other organisations tackling digital exclusion.

At Peabody, we have ensured that our practices are informed by evidence. As such, our resident engagement and consultation events have moved online using tools like Zoom meetings to continue hearing from residents. We also worked to continue recruiting resident board members digitally and found our new approach to be a success, with more than 800 residents having attended our virtual meetings over the last year. We are also working to improve our digital offerings by working on an online portal for residents and look to expand residents' ability to access the internet.

Executive Summary

Having access to the internet has never been more important than now. The pandemic has driven countless activities that used to be in-person, online. Many of these, such as meetings, may remain largely online even after the pandemic ends. But while these changes have benefitted some, not everyone is fully able to engage with the online world.

There are many potential reasons why individuals may be digitally excluded. They may not have access to the required infrastructure and/or devices or may lack skills or motivation to use technology. These factors can be driven by age, socioeconomic status, financial situation, employment or disability. There are many increasing challenges to being digitally-excluded in an increasingly digital age.

We surveyed a random sample of over 1,500 residents in March 2021. We asked them about how the pandemic has impacted their use of the internet and online services. The survey also asked those who don't use the internet about why this is the case, to try to determine the main barriers these residents face to getting online.

What did we find?

- Most of our residents were online. Only 5% of those surveyed by phone said they didn't have access to the internet.
- Those who are online, tend to use the internet frequently, with 76% using it everyday
- Residents' use of the internet has increased as a result of the pandemic with 31% of households installing broadband for the first time and a further 11% upgrading their package, as well as many buying new devices.
- The households that don't have any internet tend to be those who are older and lack the skills or interest which were more commonly given as reasons for not having internet rather than financial barriers.
- In addition to age being a factor closely related to digital exclusion, work status is also important. Among working-age people, those most likely to not engage in activities online are those who are not in paid work.

What should be done about it?

Based on our findings, our conclusions are as follows:

- The pandemic appears to have accelerated the adoption of digital skills and devices among social housing residents - with broadband internet connections now very much the norm. Residents are becoming increasingly confident with financial interactions online. This creates opportunities to expand systems for engaging with residents online via online portals, websites or facilities to enable residents to connect with one another.
- The pandemic may have exacerbated the skills gap between people in work, who have had to adapt to using more online tools, than those out of work who may now have even more difficulty finding a job being unfamiliar with new ways of working. Programmes working with jobseekers should focus on additional efforts on helping them to address this gap
- Social landlords looking to help residents find work should ensure that they are not only targeting their assistance via digital means, as those who need it most may not see it on digital platforms.
- Social landlords who manage housing schemes where broadband access to individual homes needs to be facilitated by the landlord should seek to overcome the building and safety challenges associated with retrofitting broadband in older blocks.



Background

For many of us, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed how we engage with the digital world. For some, it has simply increased the amount of time we spend online, but for others it has been the driving force behind becoming more comfortable with electronics and digital spaces. However, as our opportunities to engage with the physical world have decreased, have some people been left behind? At Peabody, we've worked to modernise our services, focusing on balancing the convenience and self-sufficiency of online tools and services against the preference some of our residents have for in-person services. With this as a long-standing value, when the pandemic hit, we wanted to know more about how our residents felt about communication and services being pushed increasingly online.

There are many potential reasons why individuals may be digitally excluded. They may not have access to the required infrastructure and/or devices or may lack the skills or motivation to use technology. These factors can be driven by age, socioeconomic status, employment or disability. There are many potential drawbacks of being digitally-excluded, such as having difficulty accessing support services, making medical appointments, and using contact tracing apps. In addition, when Covid-19 closed schools access to the internet and the availability of sufficient devices became a requirement for children trying to attend online learning. According to an Ofcom survey from Jan-March 2020, 9% of households containing children did not have home access to a laptop, desktop PC or tablet.¹

This report sought to answer three main questions:

1. How has the pandemic affected our residents' level of digital engagement?
2. Has the pandemic changed how and why our residents get online?
3. What lessons are there for housing providers?

These are questions we must ask for two key reasons. Firstly, those who remain digitally excluded may be finding life harder – and we should seek to help them with this. Secondly, if residents who previously didn't feel comfortable in online spaces are becoming increasingly adept with them, we should see this as an opportunity to increase the number of ways they are able to access our services.

While it would be informative to simply ask residents what impact the pandemic has had on their online lives, we were lucky enough to have some pre-existing data regarding how our residents engaged with the internet prior to the pandemic. In 2018, we conducted a survey amongst our residents asking them questions about how they engage with us online, as well as how they use the internet in their day to day lives. This has enabled us to compare the respondents of our recent 2021 survey with the responses of a very similar group of residents back in 2018, giving us insight into how the pandemic may have affected how often residents use the internet, the devices they use to do so, and what they use the internet for.

We also wanted to hear directly from our residents about how they changed their digital behaviour in response to the pandemic. The second section of our report, therefore, focuses on what our residents said about how they changed their digital habits in response to the pandemic.

Finally, we wanted to understand how we could use this information to improve the services we offer our residents. Households are becoming increasingly used to having on-demand services at their fingertips and so we want to understand how to optimise those experiences while still catering to those who prefer another approach. The third section of this report summarises our conclusion on this subject matter for other organisations who may be finding themselves in similar positions.

¹ <https://post.parliament.uk/covid-19-and-the-digital-divide/>

Research approach

In March and April 2021, the Research & Insight team conducted a survey on digital inclusion contacting residents by phone and email. In total, we surveyed a representative sample of 1,008 residents by telephone and 538 residents online via email. For those who would like more detail on the demographics of the sample and how it compares to our resident population, please refer to the Annex. This was our first time conducting a mixed survey and it has given us useful insight into the effectiveness of different survey methods, as well as into the different views held by each group of residents in regards to online engagement within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

An interesting finding from our research was that the demographics of those who responded online did not differ drastically from those who responded via telephone. While we had expected that more individuals from older age groups would respond over telephone, this was largely not the case. In fact, more residents from the 16-24 age group responded via telephone than online. The main exception was for residents aged 77+, where many more of them responded over the phone than online. When looking at other demographics, such as sex, ethnicity, and tenure, the samples from our telephone and online surveys were surprisingly similar.



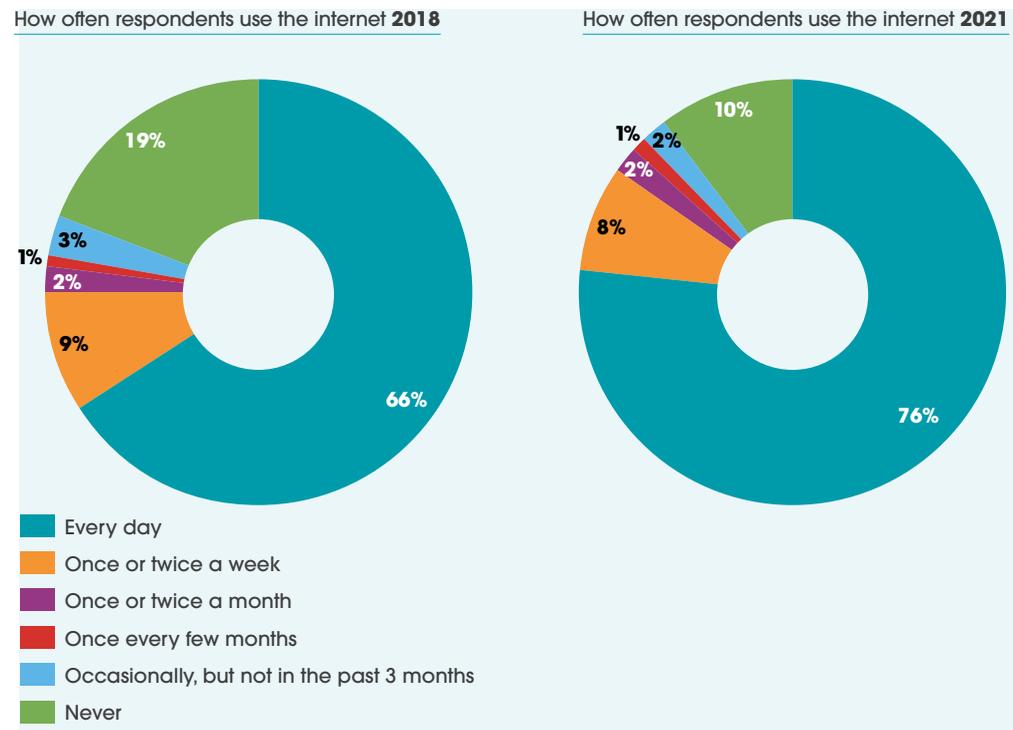
Research findings

How has the pandemic affected our residents' digital engagement?

This isn't the first time we've asked our residents about their experiences accessing digital services. In 2018 we undertook a survey that included questions about how often they used the internet, what devices they used to access it, and what for. This 2018 survey was conducted only via telephone. In order to see how things had changed in the last three years, we compared its findings with the telephone arm of the 2021 survey.

Frequency of internet usage

Charts 1 below look at how often respondents of the two different surveys said they use the internet.



What we see is very interesting. The number of respondents using the internet every day has increased from two thirds to over three quarters of respondents and those who said "never" has dropped by almost half. This trend is especially interesting given that the question we asked between the two surveys changed slightly.

In 2018, we simply asked how often they used the internet. However, in 2021 we were curious about how many used the internet for purposes other than streaming, watching YouTube or using social media. In the latest interview we therefore specifically asked how often they used the internet for purposes other than those activities. We might have expected this to reduce the number of respondents answering "every day" or have increased the number of those answering "never". Instead, we have seen the opposite. This suggests that, in addition to more people becoming familiarised with technology as time goes on, the pandemic has played a role in getting residents who didn't use the internet before to engage with it. It's also encouraged those already using it to use it more often – and this trend cannot be explained by increased media streaming.

We will have to wait and see whether the lifting of pandemic restrictions decreases some people's interest in using the internet, or if these new behaviours will stick.

Has the pandemic changed how and why residents get online?

One of the goals of our 2021 Digital Inclusion survey was to understand how our residents access the internet, and whether this has changed since the start of the pandemic.

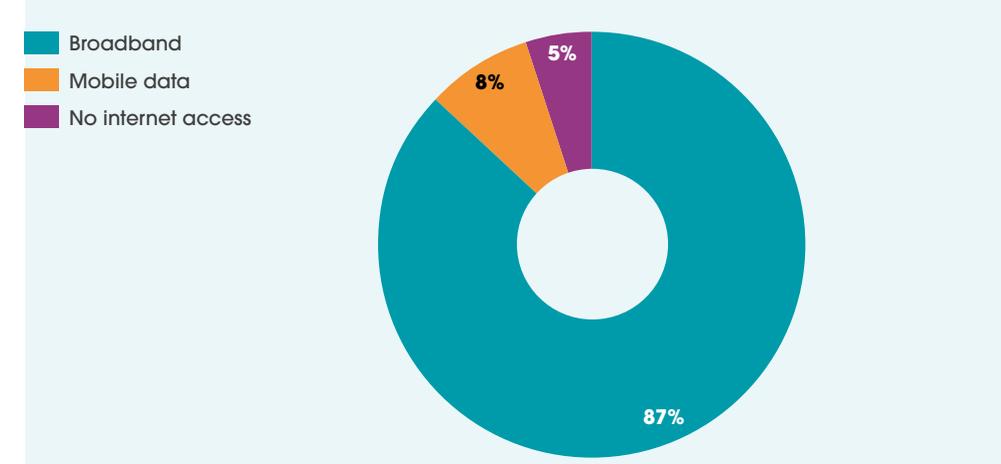
Broadband and ownership of devices

Increasing access to Broadband

As a baseline, we wanted to know if respondents access the internet through broadband or by using mobile data. Chart 3 below displays the answers from our respondents. Broadband is by far the most common way for our residents to access the internet when at home. The number of respondents using mobile data to access the internet is almost as small as the number who don't have internet access at all.

Chart 2

How often respondents access internet at home



While Chart 2 does give an accurate overview of how respondents access internet at home, there were slight differences in the responses from telephone and online respondents. Namely, telephone respondents were more likely not to have any internet access than those responding online at 8% versus 2%, and were also slightly more likely to use mobile data to access the internet at 8% compared to 7%.

But has the pandemic driven residents to change how they access the internet? To understand this we asked residents if they have had their broadband installed or upgraded since March 2020.

The numbers who reported that they had were striking:

- 30% reported that they had upgraded their broadband
- 31% reported that they had had broadband installed.

It is also interesting to note that around 28% of respondents who had had broadband installed since March 2020 also upgraded their broadband, meaning that there was overlap between these two groups.

This suggests a rapid adaptation of broadband, with it very much becoming the norm during the last 14 months.

Residents with limited internet access

Despite the increase in residents installing and upgrading broadband, not all of our respondents reported having internet access. This lack of access was not spread evenly across the sample, however. In total, 7% of our phone survey respondents said that they had no internet access .

Although the numbers without internet were relatively small, almost three times as many general needs tenants reported not having access compared to homeowners. There were also differences in terms of household composition, with more respondents without children not having access than those with children.

The biggest factor, however, seems to be age. Forty percent of 77+ year olds reported not having internet, compared to 14% of 67-76 year olds and only 4% for all younger age groups. We were concerned that there may be residents unable to access the internet due to financial barriers. However, when we asked those without internet access, the main reasons they didn't have access was either lacking the skills to use it, feeling that they didn't need it, or being "too old".

Fortunately, most of these respondents also said that they do not experience any problems due to not having internet access. This suggests that not having access to internet is, for most of our residents, more of a choice.

Beyond those who have no internet access, there were also respondents who said that used mobile data only to get online. This was again a small proportion and was most common among young people without children. It is not obvious to what extent using only mobile data might be a personal preference, as only 2% of mobile data users whom we asked about the price of mobile data said they found it expensive.

Quality of internet

While having access to the internet is essential, it also matters what the quality of the internet is like. For that reason we also tried to get an idea about the quality of respondents' internet connection by asking whether they are able to watch videos without the stream freezing or skipping. Eight two percent of those who responded said that their video would freeze either never or very rarely. This suggests that, while the percentage of our residents who have internet is very high, nearly one in five reported struggling with pictures freezing at least once a day.

Especially for activities such as video-calling, which is essential for keeping in touch with family and friends and applying for jobs, the slowest internet speeds may not be sufficient. This therefore needs to be kept in mind when gauging how digitally-included residents are.

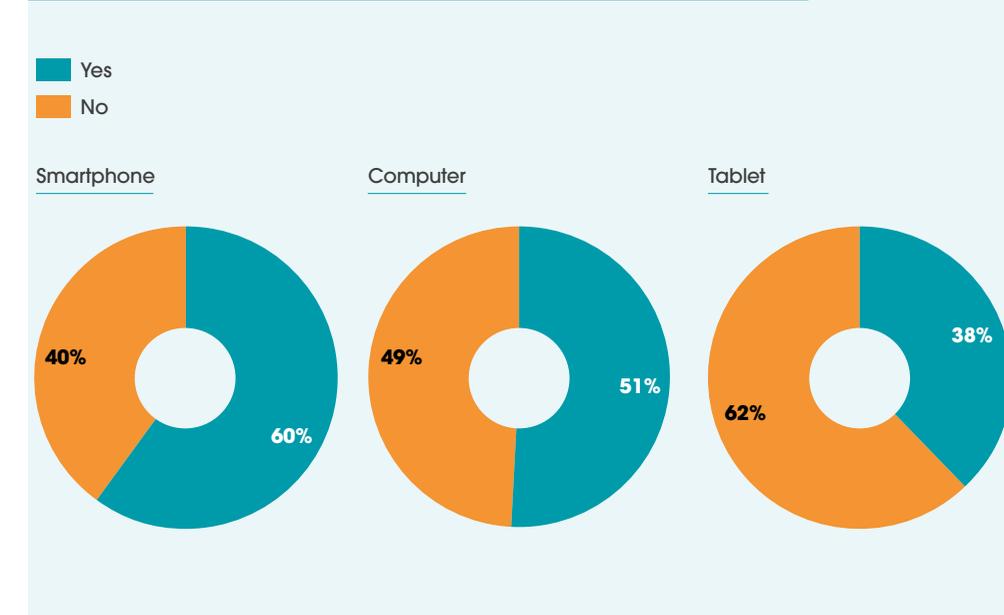
Most of the housing stock at Peabody is flatted blocks, and many of them are old. Some are listed or in locations that are hard to access. Retrofitting high speed broadband to these properties can present challenges in terms of costs, maintaining fire safety, and protecting the integrity of the building itself. Our teams are working with the blocks where connectivity is less good, recognising the need to overcome the challenges associated with retrofitting broadband in order to provide what is becoming ever more of a necessity.

The pandemic impact on device ownership

We wanted to know more about the devices our residents use to get online. This was another subject where we were able to compare responses to previous data from our 2018 survey. Chart sets 3 and 4 compare the responses of the 2018 and 2021 question asking residents if they use a given device to access the internet.

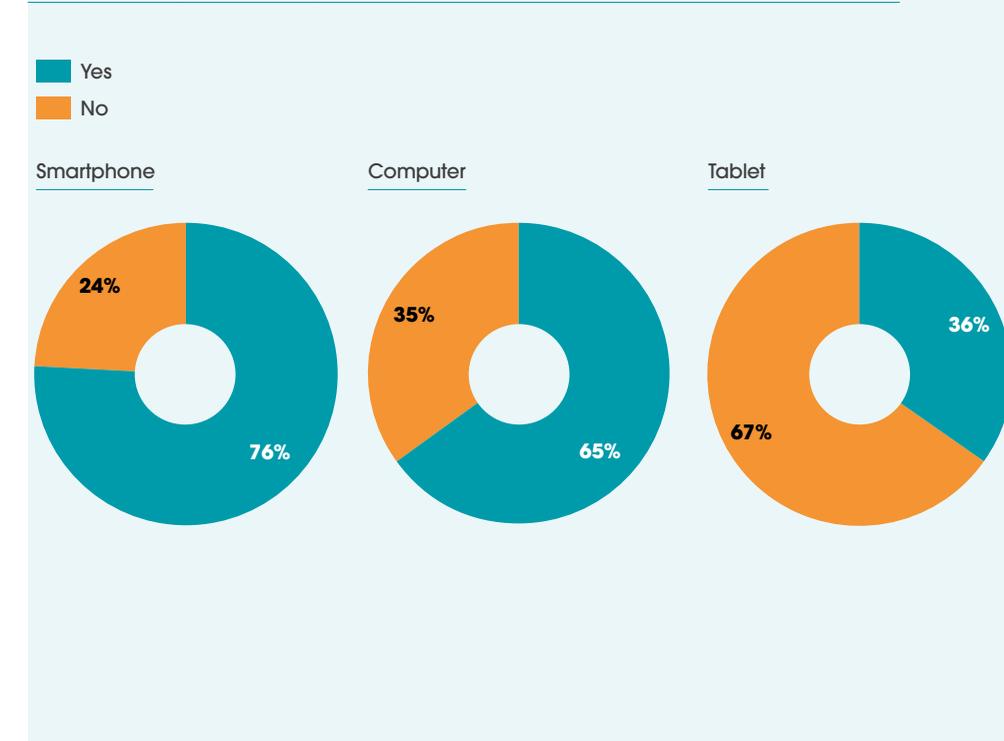
Charts 3:

What percentage of 2018 respondents used a given device to access the internet



Charts 4:

What percentage of 2021 telephone respondents use a given device to access the internet



Looking at the two sets of charts, we can see significant changes in which types of devices people are using to access the internet. The proportion of respondents using smart phones to access the internet has increased from 60% to 76% in three years. During the same period, the proportion of respondents using computers to access the internet has increased by a similar amount and the use of tablets has fallen slightly.

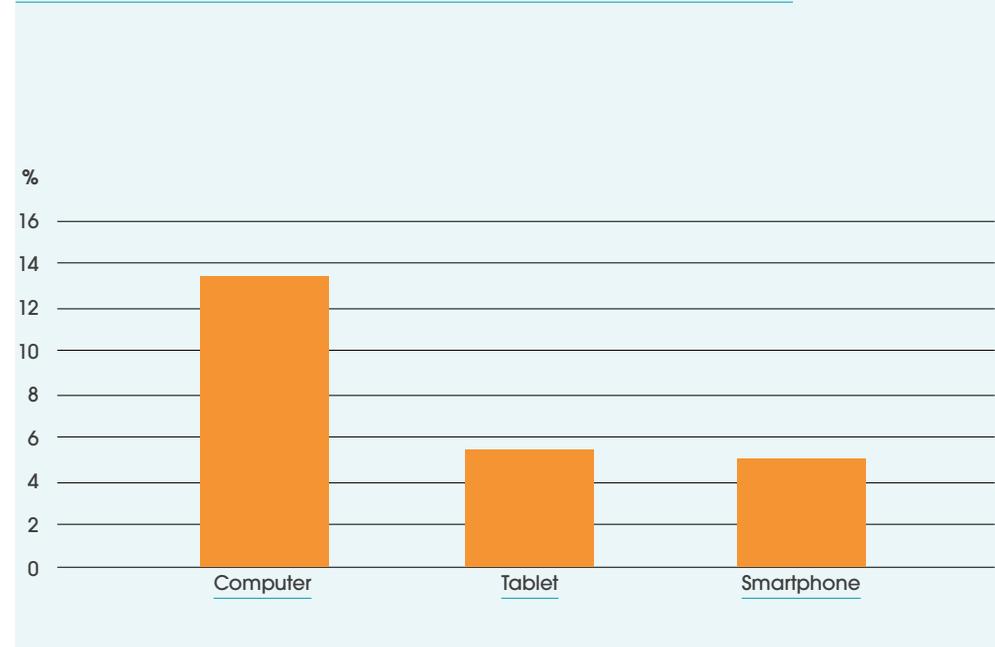
Being aware of how our residents access the internet is important, as the devices they use affect how easy websites and online tools are to navigate.

The fact that more than a third of people do not use a computer to access the internet highlights the importance of mobile-friendly sites and services, as well as the potential for reaching some people in novel ways such as through apps or video calls.

The survey also asked whether anyone in the residents' household had bought or been given a new device since March 2020. Chart 5 below shows their responses. The most common type of new device was a computer, which is less likely to make use of mobile data compared to other devices such as tablets or smart phones.

Chart 5:

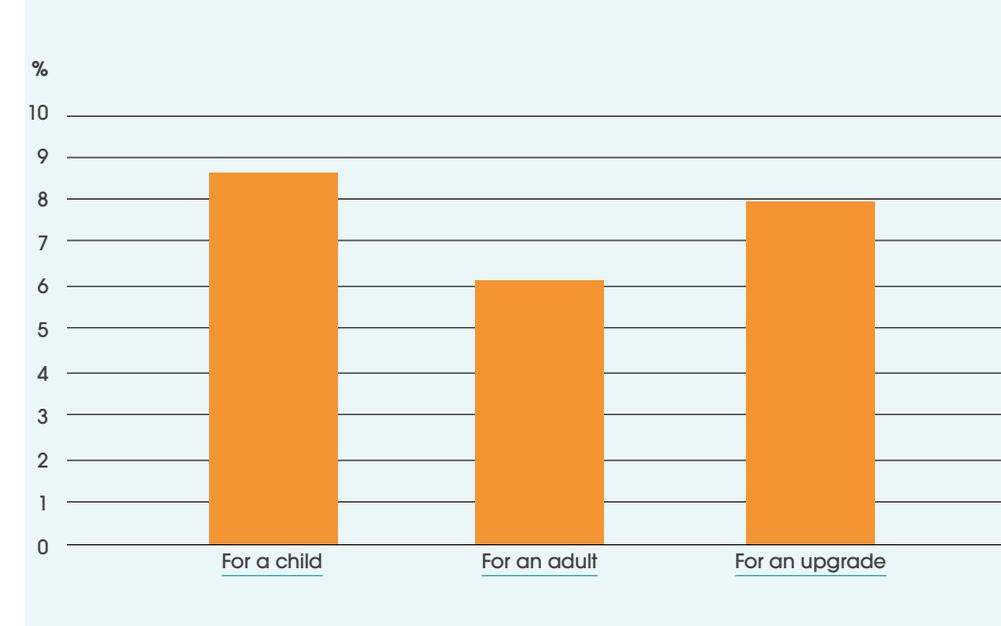
What percentage of respondents have obtained a new device since March 2020



Of course, just knowing whether a household has obtained a new device is only half the story. Households can get new devices for a variety of reasons, so we also asked what drove the decision to get a new device (Chart 6)

Chart 6:

Why the household got a new device, whether it was so a child or adult could have their own device or if it was to upgrade an existing device



The most common response for why respondents got a new device was for a child to have their own device. The second most popular response was to get one as an upgrade for an existing device, and the least popular reason was to get a new device so an adult could have their own device.

The switch to online schooling, is a likely driver here and suggests that prior to the pandemic some residents did not have the equipment required for children to successfully attend classes online. As we've noted previously, Ofcom reported that 9% of households containing children did not have access to a laptop, desktop PC or tablet in January to March 2021. Among our respondents, 30% of those with school-aged children at home said that they got a new device so a child could have their own. Only 7% of households with school-aged children reported any of their children not having any device by March 2021, when the survey took place. This suggests that a significantly higher proportion of our residents did not have sufficient devices for their children at the start of the pandemic, but that many of these households did get children the devices they needed by spring 2021.

Online classes and working from home have been defining aspects of the pandemic period. While they may have driven some to become more technologically involved, for others it may have exacerbated the difficulties of digital exclusion. This was another area where we wanted a better understanding of our residents' experiences, and so our survey also asked about what working and schooling had been like for them during the pandemic.

How do our residents find working from home?

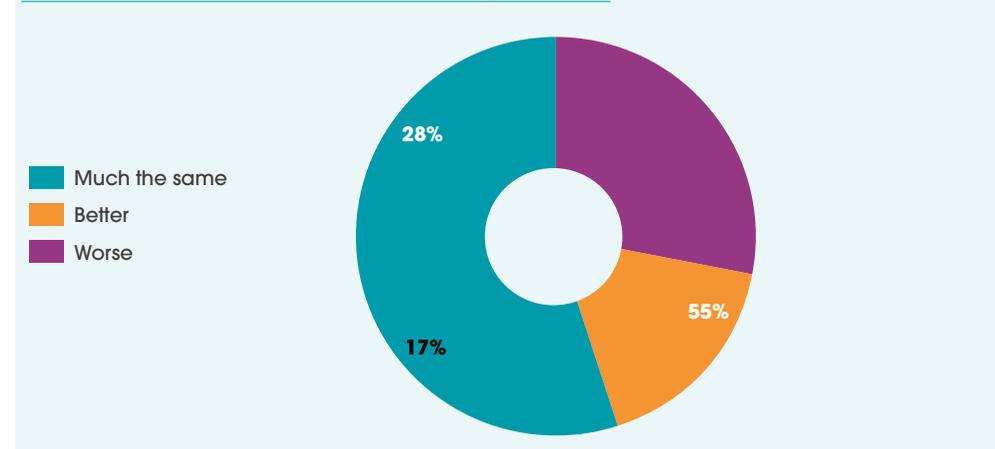
Our surveys included a question asking residents where they are currently working from, including whether the location has changed due to the pandemic. Many respondents said that they still go out for work, with around a quarter reporting working from home due to the pandemic. We also asked the residents if they were studying or in university, though very few were.

These findings tell us that the ability to work from home has become more important to our residents. If we exclude residents who aren't in paid work or retired, 30% of respondents who told us about their working location are working from home.

So, what has been the experience of residents who have had to work or study from home due to the pandemic?

Chart 7:

How respondents have found studying or working from home

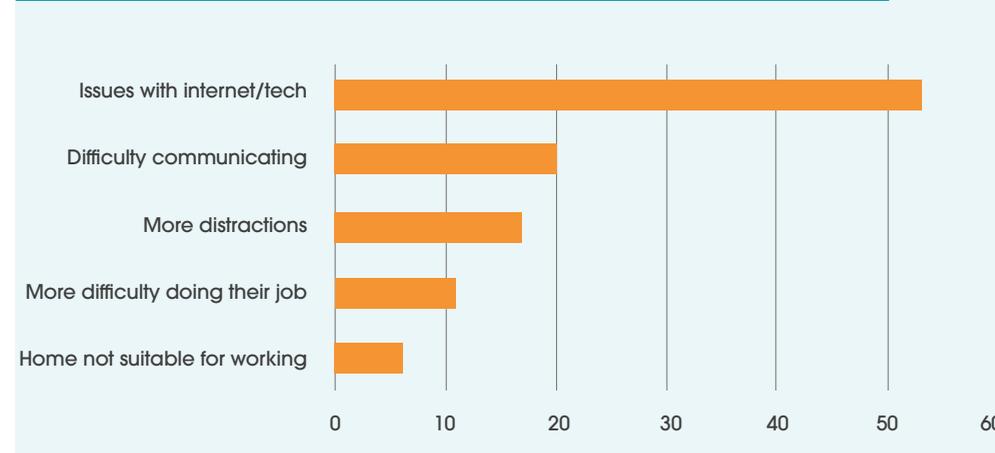


Perhaps surprisingly, the majority from both groups said that their experience had been much the same at 55%. Of the others, more found it worse than before than better.

When asked why they felt this way about working from home, respondents had a number of different answers. Of special interest to us were those who said they felt worse off, to see if there is more we could do as a landlord to support those trying to work at home. Chart 8 below breaks down the most common reasons residents gave about why they feel the way they do about working from home.

Chart 8:

Reasons given by respondents about why they feel how they do about working from home



As would be expected, many of those who said that they are now worse off cited poor internet connection (both over mobile and broadband sources). This meant that video calls were difficult, or that they had to be careful that too many devices weren't being used at once or that with many people in the building staying home the network was overloaded.

There were other common difficulties as well. Many respondents said they find it more challenging to stay connected with colleagues, both for social and professional purposes, while working from home. Others said that working from home was more distracting, especially in cases where other household members are also working or learning from home. The final two most common comments were that their jobs were easiest when working face to face, and that they didn't have room in their home for a proper workspace.

Among those who said that they were doing much the same or were better off, the reasons they gave generally weren't related to their living space. Rather, they would talk about feeling more productive, not having to commute, or feeling they were more supported by their employer.

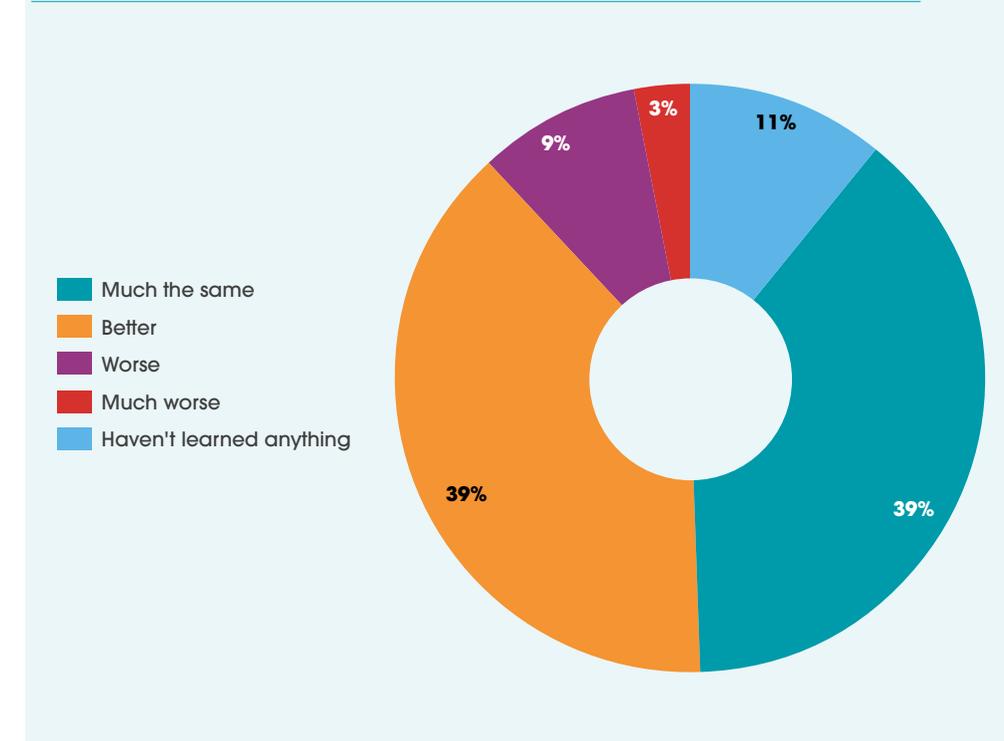
What should we take away from our residents' responses? One finding is that the majority of residents reported not being affected either positively or negatively from having to work or study from home. Among those who were unhappy, most comments were about their workplace not doing enough to accommodate communicative needs rather than their living situation. However, of those who did make comments about issues related to their homes, the most common points were not having enough space to work and not being able to access fast enough internet. As such, these are areas landlords should try to prioritise where possible.

How do our residents find schooling from home?

While working from home has been a major aspect of the pandemic, schooling from home has been at least as significant. Knowing this, we asked our residents what it has been like to have their children learn from home over the past year.

Chart 9:

How well respondents felt their children learned from home compared to at in-person school



"I am currently working from home due to the pandemic. I encounter slow connectivity, buffering etc mainly on my work laptop - not ideal."

"Always seem to have issues with internet- have changed provider many times and not got better- always told it's the area I live in- I work from home and usually have internet issues weekly/ daily"

Residents responding to the survey, March 2021

"I have to be careful when using my heating because of the affordability and have spent most of this winter freezing, while working which isn't ideal. As our flats are not the biggest I haven't the room for a desk or a proper chair so have not particularly comfortable and just want my front room back."

"I spend less time traveling, and as a result sleep better. In addition, I have better control of my time, hence I have become more efficient in my opinion."

"Better home/work life balance. Able to achieve my work targets from home in relaxed environment. No rush home to pick up child from school. Anxiety levels are down. Overall a happier person."

Chart 9 presents the responses to our question of how well residents thought their child learned from home compared to how they learned at school. We asked this question for both their oldest and second oldest child, and Chart 9 displays the responses relating to the oldest child as responses were similar for both. In general, there was close to an even split between respondents who said that their child was either better off or the same learning from home and respondents who felt their child was doing worse.

These findings drive home the importance of ensuring children are able to attend class and supports the decision to prioritise reopening schools. Hopefully we will not be faced with the choice of choosing between in-person schooling and public health again.

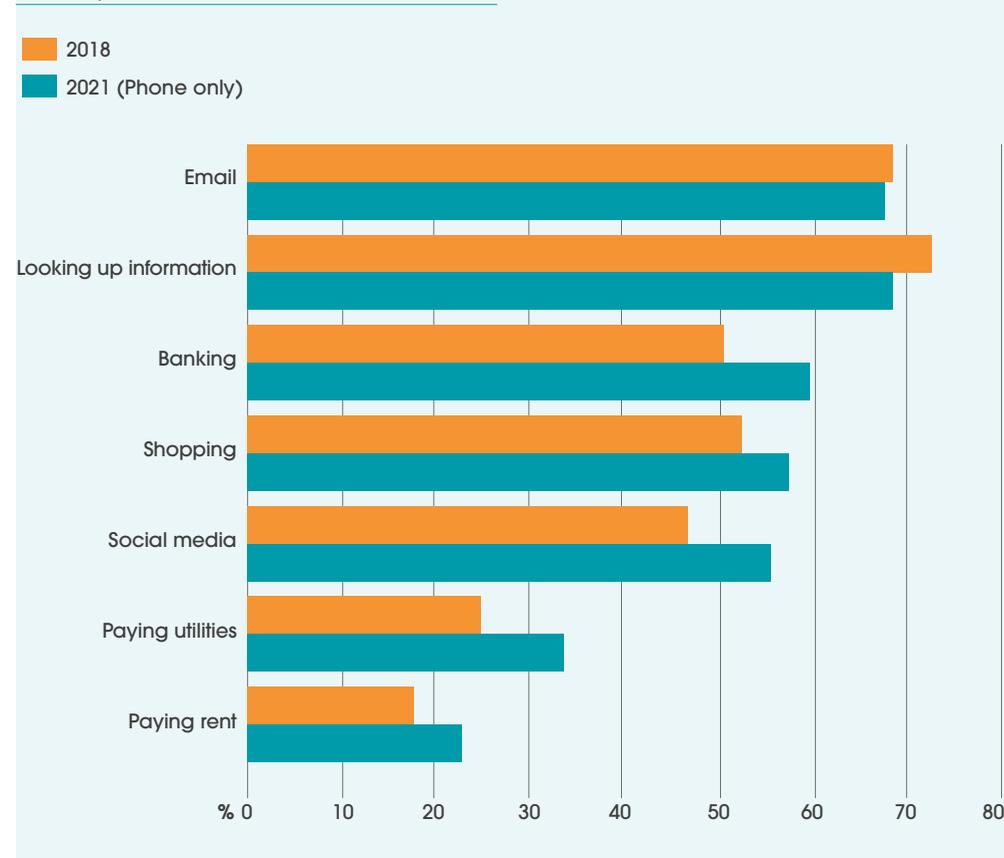
It was also clear that the issues behind online schooling aren't easily addressed. Respondents whose children were learning less well online reported that they were struggling due to distractions, a lack of space, or because of internet issues. So, making online schooling workable would require a wide range of solutions – and of course imposes a huge burden on working parents.

How have our residents changed the way they use online services?

One of the key findings we wanted from our survey was to see if the pandemic has changed not only how and how often our residents use the internet, but what they use it for. Have they become more comfortable using video calls and completing transactions online?

Chart 10:

What respondents use the internet for, 2018 vs 2021



Again, we are able to compare current behaviours against those of our residents in 2018. Chart 10 shows the comparison between 2018 and 2021 responses to the question of what respondents use the internet for.

Chart 10 presents us with a very interesting trend. Between 2018 and 2021 we see a slight decrease in respondents saying they are using the internet for activities which have always required going online, such as looking up information via search engines and using email. This is especially interesting given that using the internet to look up information once seemed to be a key draw for residents. The percentage of 2018 respondents who said they used the internet was 80%, meaning that in 2018 almost all of those who used the internet were using it to look for information as the question was asked to all respondents. However, in the case of activities for which other mediums are available, we have seen an increase in respondents doing them online. There is growth in the numbers online banking, paying bills and rent online – suggesting residents are becoming more confident with financial interactions online.

The increase in online activity is expected given the pandemic, but why fewer respondents are using the internet for email and looking up information is less clear. One possible explanation is that residents are finding social media meets their needs where they would previously have used email and search engines. Use of internet for social media saw an increase from 47% to 56% in the survey results. This suggests there may be value for housing associations such as Peabody in putting more effort into their social media presence, providing regular updates and making it easier to contact the organisation through social media's messaging platforms.

As we saw in Chart 10, what our residents use the internet for has changed over time. Specifically, we saw that there has been an increase in those using the internet for activities and services that were once physical activities such as banking and shopping. However, as technology becomes less novel and more widely accepted and understood, it would make sense that its use becomes more common. Was this shift just due to the natural progression of technology becoming more common and popular over time, or did the pandemic have a direct effect on these changes?

In order to understand this, we asked residents some questions on how specific behaviours of theirs have changed since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. These questions focused on their use of video calls and their use of online shopping. Charts 11 below present their responses.

Chart 11:

How respondents' use of video calls and online shopping has changed since March 2020



Both video calls and shopping online have become much more popular since March 2020, with video conferencing being something many tried for the first time. Fifteen percent said that they have started using video call for the first time, with almost half saying that they were using video calls more often. This may mean potential for landlords such as Peabody, as well as other agencies, to use video calls to engage with residents and customers.

A perhaps more surprising finding was the number of people who are still not using video calling or online shopping, even since March 2020. This suggests, especially given the similarity of the figures, that there is still a portion of social housing residents who are not interested in moving their lives online.

Even if social landlords adopt video calls as a new method of engaging with residents, they shouldn't anticipate it being a way to engage with their entire populations.

Who remains digitally excluded?

Though most residents we spoke to do have internet, 5% did not. The greatest factor in determining whether a resident wouldn't have internet seemed to be age, with 40% of those over 77 years of age not having any. This is compared to 15% of 67-76 year olds, and only 4% of younger age groups.

However, it doesn't seem that age is the only factor. The findings of our survey suggest that there is also a relationship between respondents who aren't engaging in activities online and their employment status. As an example, Table 1 below shows what percent of working-age respondents only use mobile data, don't use the internet, use the internet for shopping, and use the internet for video calling.

Table 1:
How different indicators of digital exclusion vary by employment status

	% who only use mobile data	% not online	% using the internet for shopping	% using the internet for video calling
In work	4%	2%	86%	84%
Not in work	6%	6%	69%	65%

Looking at respondents not currently in work, 50% more reported using only mobile data compared to respondents who were in work. Three times as many not in work residents reported not using the internet compared to their in-work counterparts.

Fifty percent more respondents not currently in work reported using only mobile data compared to respondents who were in work. Three times as many reported not using the internet compared to their in-work counterparts.

Over 80% of respondents currently in paid work use the internet for shopping or for online calls compared to only 60% of those not in paid work. This means that, while age might be one of the most important factors influencing whether a person uses the internet, employment status should also be kept in mind.

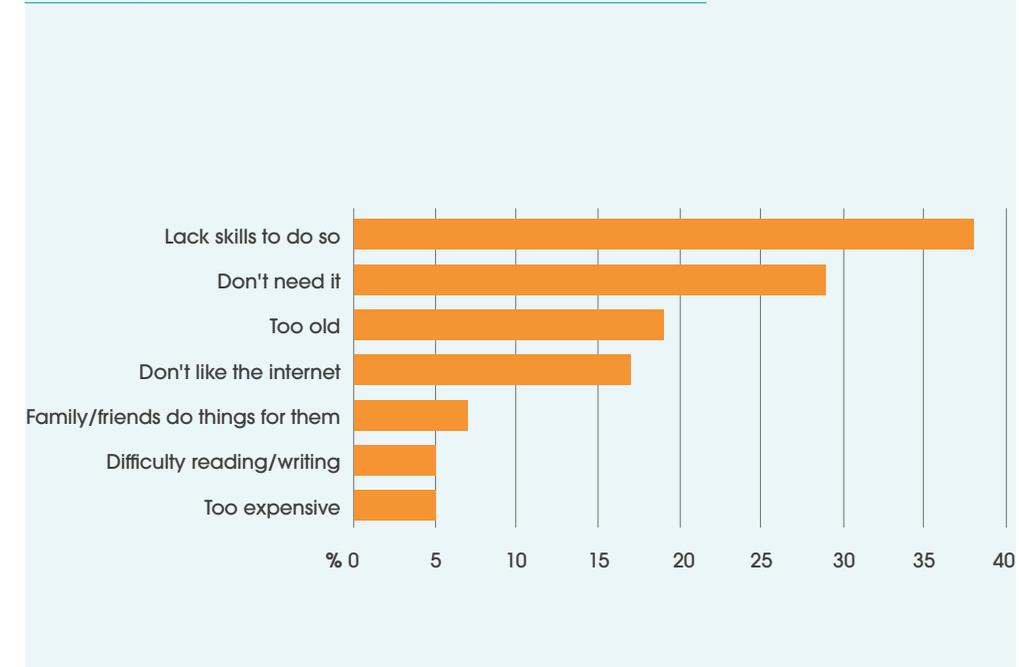
There were some other factors that also seemed to relate to whether residents were digitally excluded. For example, 6% of general needs tenants said they didn't have internet compared to only 2% of homeowners.

Household composition also seems to make a difference, as 7% of households without any school-aged children didn't have internet compared to 0.4% of those with school-aged children. There were slight differences when looking at ethnicity, but those differences are largely explained by age cohorts.

The relationship between age and being digitally excluded also stood out in respondents' answers to the question of why they don't use the internet, which are presented in Chart 12 below.

Chart 12:

Reasons respondents gave when asked why they don't use the internet



"I am not interested in using it. All I need is a mobile phone to make calls. With my disabilities I couldn't use it as I would need to use my hands".

"I am very dyslexic so I do not use the internet."

Residents responding to the survey, March 2021

The most common reason for not using the internet was a lack of skills. Not feeling that they need the internet was the second most popular answer, after which feeling "too old" to use that sort of technology, or not being interested in it were most popular. While some respondents mentioned having difficulty with literacy, or affording the internet, these were less common reasons for not accessing the internet.

What do these responses mean for improving digital inclusion? On the one hand, it is positive that only a small percentage of residents don't have access to the internet. On the other hand, for those who are still not online, it will likely be difficult to change that. For those who don't feel they need the internet, feel too old for it, or simply don't like it, it will probably be difficult to change their minds. However, it is very possible that the percentage of people feeling this way will shrink over time, as the 66-76 year old population is already using the internet more than the 77+ cohort, and will probably continue to do so even as they age.

For those who are younger and still not using the internet, however, more can be done. Reading through open responses about why they do not use the internet, many cited physical and mental disabilities that make it difficult or impossible to be digitally included. This suggests that, when looking to increase digital inclusion amongst younger age groups, it should be done with an understanding that they may have additional needs that should be addressed alongside their digital exclusion.

Conclusions

Can this help us improve our services?

As more social housing residents are doing things online, there are more opportunities to engage with them online. Our research findings suggest that there are clearly ways for social landlords to improve their services by taking advantage of increased online engagement from residents following the Covid-19 pandemic, but that there is also more that they can do in making sure that their homes are suitable for working, studying or socialising from home.

Access to high-speed internet is not just a luxury, but essential for facilitating access to jobs, education and social interaction. Any reports of residents lacking broadband access in flats or via connections that landlords control should be taken seriously. Landlords should also be transparent when advertising new homes (such as on choice-based letting systems) about what type of internet is available in their homes, so that residents can make informed decisions about whether or not a home will be able to meet their needs. In addition, homes should be designed with the mindset that they may need to be spaces for more than just relaxation, but for work as well.

The pandemic has been difficult for everyone, and social housing residents are no exception. There are also opportunities created and we should be aware that tools such as video calls, create additional ways to interact with our residents and provide them with the services they need.

It is important also to respond to the changing ways in which people do things online - Interest in receiving information via social media is increasing while using email is less universal as a way to share information.

Since the start of the pandemic, Peabody has been working to innovate our approach to resident engagement. For example, our resident engagement and consultation moved online as we used tools like Zoom meetings to continue hearing from residents. We also worked to continue recruiting resident board members digitally.

We've found our new approach to be a success, with more than 800 residents having attended our virtual meetings over the last year.

What does this mean for the digitally excluded?

This research has highlighted the shrinking numbers of social housing residents who are still not online. This may mean they become increasingly isolated or excluded from interactions that other people increasingly take for granted and struggle to access work, social interaction or educational opportunities.

This raises the concern that the pandemic may potentially exacerbate the skills gap between people in work, who have had to adapt to using more online tools, and those out of work who have not. If so, that could make it even more difficult for the latter group to eventually find work, as they will now be unfamiliar with new ways of working. At Peabody our employment teams help residents to access work - this is something that needs considering when addressing the barriers these residents experience.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, our conclusions to our initial questions are:

For helping people find work

- The pandemic may have exacerbated the skills gap between people in work, who have had to adapt to using more online tools, and those out of work who may now have even more difficulty finding a job being unfamiliar with new ways of working. Programmes working with jobseekers should focus additional efforts on helping them to address this gap

For landlords

- Social landlords looking to help residents find work should ensure that they are not only targeting their assistance via digital means, as those who need it most may not see it on digital platforms.
- Social landlords who manage housing schemes where broadband access to individual homes needs to be facilitated by the landlord should seek to overcome the challenges associated with retrofitting broadband in older blocks. Building safety needs to be maintained, but employment opportunities in the future may necessitate a high-quality internet connection.

New opportunities

- The pandemic appears to have accelerated the pace of adaptation of digital skills and devices among social housing residents - with broadband internet connections very much the norm now. Residents are becoming increasingly confident with financial interactions online. This creates opportunities to expand systems for engaging with residents online via online portals, websites or facilities to enable residents to connect with one another.



Annex

Contact details of Digital Inclusion Respondents (according to Peabody's records):

	% Of Peabody population who:	% of telephone respondents who:	% of email respondents who:
Have a phone number	99%	100%	99%
Have an email address	66%	71%	100%
Have no number or email address	0.4%	0%	0%

Age spread of survey respondents, compared with Peabody's resident population:

Age band	Survey arm		Survey respondents	Peabody total population
	Email	Phone		
16-24	1%	2%	2%	2%
25-34	9%	12%	11%	11%
35-44	23%	20%	21%	20%
45-54	26%	22%	23%	22%
55-66	29%	22%	25%	22%
67-76	7%	10%	9%	8%
77+	2%	7%	5%	5%
NA	4%	6%	5%	10%
Grand Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

NB - the phone survey used quotas to ensure age group representation.

Tenure type spread of Digital Inclusion respondents:

Tenure	Survey arm		Survey respondents	Peabody total population
	Email	Phone		
General needs	75%	75%	75%	69%
Homeownership	18%	18%	18%	22%
Market and intermediate rent	5%	4%	5%	4%
Supported housing	2%	3%	2%	5%
Grand Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Contact details of Digital Inclusion respondents:

Sex	Survey type		Survey respondents	Peabody total population
	Email	Phone		
Female	63%	59%	60%	58%
Male	37%	41%	40%	42%
Transgender	0%	0%	0%	0%*
Grand Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

*Indicates a % of below 1%