

## **Short-term Savings Risk Long-term Costs**

**Op Ed by Heléna Herklots CBE, Older People's Commissioner for Wales**

Finding the information we need is something we often take for granted these days. With just a few taps and swipes on the smartphone in our pocket, we can find out almost anything, which is obviously incredibly useful.

But the rapid shift towards digital is leaving many people feeling excluded and left behind: data from the National Survey for Wales indicates that 10 per cent of the Welsh population – over 300,000 people – do not use the internet.

Levels of digital exclusion amongst older people are even higher – around a third of people aged 75+ in Wales do not use the internet, and many individuals are now finding it difficult, if not impossible, to complete everyday tasks they previously found straightforward, something I highlighted in my recent Access Denied report.

That's why I shared concerns about proposals to remove the legal requirement to publish notices of council tax charges in newspapers in evidence I shared with the Senedd's Local Government and Housing Committee earlier this year.

As I highlighted in my evidence, the proposed changes would have a disproportionate impact upon older people, and the promise of 'suitable alternative arrangements', which is decidedly vague and ambiguous, is not likely to provide any assurance to older people who rely on their local paper to access information.

Concerns have also been raised that similar requirements to publish other forms of public notices in newspapers may be removed in the future, which could leave many older people further excluded and disengaged.

A growing number of Senedd Members have voiced their concerns about the impact of the proposed changes, and I welcome the fact that we are seeing the potential consequences – and unintended consequences – being scrutinised in more detail.

I recognise the significant financial pressures that local authorities are facing, but short-term financial savings must not be delivered at the cost of people being left behind and unable to access information they need, not just older people but also other groups at greatest risk of digital exclusion, including people with disabilities, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people and those on low incomes.

But more than that, I am concerned about the kind of message these proposals send to people who are digitally excluded, often individuals in vulnerable situations facing other forms of social exclusion.

In my Access Denied report, older people told me that the growing digital divide often leaves them feeling worthless, inadequate and that they are not valued by society.

In the past, legislation has been used to make information and services more accessible, to help enable more people to access them, to help tackle the barriers that leave people excluded.

But these proposals, offered with no detail about what suitable alternative arrangements mean – suggesting little thought has been given to those who could be affected by the changes – risk having the opposite effect.

That's why, the requirement to publish council tax notices in local newspapers should be retained, and the proposals to remove this should be removed from the Bill currently making its way through the Senedd.

And in the longer-term, greater efforts are needed across society to ensure that, regardless of our circumstances or digital skills, we are enabled and supported to access the information we need.