

National Pensioners' Convention

Connections for All: digital & the right to choose

To mark UN International Day of Older People on 1st October, the National Pensioners' Convention (NPC) held a Webinar titled 'Connections For All: Digital & The Right to Choose'. This was the latest event in the NPC's campaign on digital inclusion/exclusion, backed by the union (DM 2021, motion 76).

Speakers included Shadow Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Jo Stevens MP; Age UK Charity Director Caroline Abrahams CBE; retired GP Dr Jennifer Bute; and NPC Digital Working Party chair, Jenny Sims, NUJ 60+ Co-chair.

Discussions included why many older people still reject the benefits of going online - including the fear of being scammed, and what can be done to ensure they are not excluded from society.

Shadow Culture Secretary Jo Stevens MP said urgent action was needed and that with £2.3billion lost to victims in England, Wales and Northern Ireland last year the government was not doing enough to protect people from scams.

She claimed the Online Safety bill was not fit for purpose, and did not go far enough to tackle the problems of fraud – now the most commonly experienced crime.

She promised to take up the issues at her first meeting with her opposite number, DCMS Secretary of State, Nadine Dorries, MP.

NUJ 60+ Co-chair, Jenny Sims, presenting the Digital Working Party's report on scams, whose recommendations for a raft of NPC campaign actions have been approved by its Executive, warned against victim blaming.

The report, Criminal Deception, concluded: "There is an urgent need for stronger political and corporate leadership, coordination, and ambition in tackling scams. Whilst there are steps that individuals can take; the real action must come from government and companies to reduce the number of scams that people encounter."

NPC Webinar Chair, Jan Shortt, NPC General Secretary said: "Nearly two million over 75s (Age UK) still don't use the internet, and many of our NPC members cite fears of scams as much as lack of knowledge, confidence and money as reasons for not going online. But some older people simply don't want to use the internet, even if they could and had training.

"It is not acceptable to just discount their rights to choose how they stay connected in this increasingly digitalised world, just to suit government and corporate agendas. We need to ensure that businesses, government and even the NHS – which has seen a rise in GP internet video consultations – offer people a choice of ways to communicate, whether this is by telephone, or letter, face to face, or online.

Age UK research** shows that while internet usage increased during the pandemic, it did not rise as much among the over 75s. Though the costs of buying a tablet or smartphone and the expense of broadband and internet security were barriers, many simply did not want to go online.

The consensus was that policymakers need to take account of the fact that not everyone is online, and that people have the right to choose to be online or not.

A recording of the webinar is available at: <https://www.npcuk.org/post/digital-the-right-to-choose>