AI definition – Information Commissioner's office:
 "AI is an umbrella term for a range of technologies and approaches that often attempt to mimic human thought to solve complex tasks."
See inside for other definitions and articles on AI and data issues.

_____

At long last!
A Government Digital Inclusion Action Plan

Campaigners have welcomed the launch of a Digital Inclusion Action Plan by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) – the first for more than a decade.

   Elizabeth Anderson, CEO, the Digital Poverty Alliance, said: "The Digital Poverty Alliance (DPA) has long advocated for a national strategy, and this plan reflects the core of our policy asks. Seeing it realised is a significant step forward in ensuring that no one is left behind in an increasingly digital world.

   "At the heart of this plan is a national device donation scheme – and the DPA is leading its delivery. Drawing on our experience in large-scale device donation programmes, we will ensure that surplus and unused devices from government reach those who need them most." She added, collaboration was "essential to driving meaningful progress."

   Helen Milner, OBE, Group CEO, Good Things Foundation, which has been at the forefront of developing partnerships with the private and public sectors for the donation of devices, said: "For the first time ever, digital inclusion is firmly on the national agenda."

Call for evidence
   Alongside the five key actions and industry pledges comes a **call for evidence** for the public to have their say on what works for digital inclusion, specifically focused on four key areas: digital skills, data and device poverty, digital services, and building confidence and supporting local delivery. Open to everyone until 11.55pm 9th April.
Digital Inclusion Action Plan - GOV.UK

EDITORIAL
Time to celebrate.

It's been a long fight to get the government to produce a new fit-for-purpose digital inclusion strategy. But with other campaigners we've won! It started with the launch of our *Connections for All* campaign in February 2021. Two years later, 2023, in Issue 1 of this newsletter David Briggs, a founder Digital Working Party (DWP)member wrote*: "Overall, it is clear the UK government has an inadequate policy for older people and online access…"*

Time to reflect.

In 2019, following first DWP first meeting, we called for the NPC to support and work in in partnership with the Good Things Foundation, the UK's leading digital inclusion charity. And later, following the launch of the Digital Poverty Alliance, we recommended the NPC sign up to become one of their 'official partners.' It's great that at last we have a Digital Action Plan, and that the charities will have a key role. But the battle's not over! One in two older adults in the UK are in digital poverty, and 25% of people over 65 don't use the internet.

Time to say goodbye.

Sadly, this is my last issue as editor. I am stepping down because of other commitments but will continue to chair the Digital Working Party and contribute occasional articles whenever possible. I thank readers for their letters and articles – please keep them coming and support the NPC's continuing *Connections for All* digital inclusion/exclusion campaign in any way you can!

Opinion (not generated by AI!)
By Stephen Rennie, Digital Working Party member

The lengthy and very well-informed Commons Committee discussion on continued acceptance of cash laid bare the twin consensus at play. The first is that further brutalising pensioners and the less able is politically a bad thing, hence a wealth of soft remarks about care, consideration, pace of change and good information.

The second is that we are in the throes of major changes to retail banking, consumer services and retail commerce, with which we interfere at our peril. Commercial and investment banking has leapt from this pack and gone far ahead, as has the insurance industry. The debate then is about small scale transactions involving a reducing minority of consumers. There is no debate about the direction of travel. The process may slow a little and be uneven, leading to pockets of respite.

The evidence, supported by Radio 4 announcements on business lobby forecasting, is that future projections on employment are already taking account of major reductions in the staffing of cash-based systems and the introduction of AI alternatives to support for customers using electronic systems. There is clear government support for both in the UK, the EU, the USA and in areas influenced by China. So, cash will not be abolished, but it will be allowed to wither and die by neglect. The purchasing power of those wanting to save it falls way below sustainable levels.

All the above is well summarised by the following quote:-
Q140 This Government have made it really clear that AI and digitisation of public services is an essential lever for growth. The Prime Minister said that we will increase the public sector compute, the engine of AI power, by at least a factor of 20. The Committee heard from the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, James Murray, about how the digitisation of HMRC was going to dramatically improve the public's experience of that service. And for those with a lust for evidence, a video:-
https://www.parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/2b84ac b1-5d46-4f2e-9e83-8e42a7826839

A beginner's guide to AI

Dereck Roberts, NPC Wales Executive, who describes himself as an 'Old Techie,' tells us what he got out of attending a recent Digital Communities Wales (DCW) webinar on AI for beginners.

Digital Communities Wales is a Welsh Government funded project which exists to reduce digital exclusion in Wales. They recently provided a one and half hour-long webinar on the subject of Artificial Intelligence (AI): Discovering AI with confidence: A beginner's guide to AI. It is the hot topic of today with rumours and fears about how AI will affect jobs and maybe take over the world! But what is it? And what did I get from the webinar?

AI is already in widespread use in many online APPs. AI is used by the worldwide mega corporations like Amazon, Google, Microsoft *et al* to garner information about us all which they use for their marketing (and now, for sure, in some cases political) programmes. It is a learning tool. There is an old computer code-writer's axiom which is well worth remembering when dealing with any AI system – "garbage in garbage out."

AI: Online Safety Considerations – avoiding scams.

Human beings need to retain their own lovely neural network brain's ability to do critical thinking. Ask yourself:

1. Does this feel right?

2. Does it match my knowledge of the subject?

3. Are there other sources of information to help verify facts?

4. Who published the information

AI has lots of sets of tools which are actually useful. There are AI tools which can read text and convert it into speech (in any language you want) – handy if you are sight impeded. There are creative tools like image generators which can create images, art, and video from simple text inputs. They also have dangers as you can create clones of people and use them to scam people and produce Fake News.

It is early days for AI but for the future it will bring advances in medical science and treatments and in other areas of our lives. AI will accelerate again as quantum computing comes along. Scary? Yes!

Keep thinking critically.

And if you are in a meeting and are asked, do you consent to the meeting being recorded? – remember - it will be going into one of those clever AI systems to automatically do the minutes (verbatim if asked). Save our note takers!

DWP definition of AI:

A.I. is the simulation of human intelligence by computer devices. It is the ability of a computer to perform tasks commonly associated with human beings and learning to complete these processes more efficiently and independently.

_____

AI - dictionary definition

Supplied by Clare Wilkins, Secretary East Midlands NPC, and chair of the Climate Change Working Party, who has produced a briefing paper on AI for the NPC.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines AI – Artificial Intelligence as: "The capacity of computers or other machines to exhibit or simulate intelligent behaviour; the field of study concerned with this.

In later use also: software used to perform tasks or produce output previously thought to require human intelligence, esp. by using machine learning to extrapolate from large collections of data. Also, as a count noun: an instance of this type of software; a (notional) entity exhibiting such intelligence."
She comments: "The definition remains clear enough but the usage of the term and the impression it gives are far from simple and are not neutral."
https://www.oed.com/dictionary/artificial-intelligence_n?tl=true

****
Tribute to Alan Edgar

We are sad to report the recent death of Alan Edgar, long serving member of Thames Valley NPC, and a founder member of the NPC's digital working party which had its first meeting in September 2019. A skilled researcher and writer, Alan co-authored the Four Nations report which led to the launch of the NPC's digital inclusion/exclusion campaign, Connections for All, and was a valued contributor to our newsletter. He will be greatly missed.

The funeral will be held on Wednesday the 19th of March at 11.30 am at Easthamstead Park Crematorium, Braccan Chapel, South Road, Off Nine Mile Ride, Wokingham. RG40 3DW.

There will be a live stream to the Service for those who are not able to attend. A tribute page has been set up: https://alanedga.muchloved.com/

Fund IT training for older people

Maureen Childs, MBCS BSc, Digital Working Party member, wrote recently to a City of London community officer arguing the following case for funding IT training and education for older people.

The rapid advancement of AI and digital technologies is reshaping society, and older people must be equipped to navigate this transformation. Public funding for IT training and education for older individuals is not merely a compassionate choice but a strategic investment in the UK's social and economic future. By enabling older people to harness the power of technology, we ensure a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous society for all.

The Prime Minister's recent announcement about prioritizing new technologies highlights the UK's ambition to remain at the forefront of innovation. While this vision is laudable, it also underscores the growing digital divide, particularly among older people. Many older individuals have had limited or no formal IT training, which has resulted in significant barriers to accessing services, participating in the economy, and staying connected in an increasingly digital world.

The Challenges of Digital Exclusion for Older People

Limited Access to Essential Services:
 Many government and private services, including healthcare, banking, and utility management, are now primarily accessed online. Older individuals who lack digital literacy face difficulties managing these critical aspects of their lives.

Social Isolation:
Technology offers opportunities to stay connected with family and friends, especially in remote areas or during times of limited mobility. Older adults without digital skills may experience greater isolation and loneliness.

Economic Disadvantage:
A lack of IT skills can exclude older people from participating in the modern economy, whether as consumers benefiting from online discounts or as contributors seeking part-time work or entrepreneurial opportunities.

Health and Safety Risks:
Many health technologies, such as telemedicine platforms and health-monitoring apps, require a basic understanding of IT. Without training, older adults may struggle to access these innovations, impacting their overall well-being.

Benefits of IT Training for Older People

Empowerment and Independence:
 Learning IT skills can help older individuals manage their lives more effectively, from paying bills online to scheduling medical appointments, thereby fostering greater independence.

Improved Mental Health and Well-Being:
Digital skills enable older people to stay socially connected, reducing loneliness and its associated mental health risks. Engaging with technology also provides cognitive stimulation, which can help in maintaining mental sharpness.

Enhanced Economic Participation:
Training can open doors for older individuals to re-enter the workforce, start online businesses, or engage in flexible remote work, contributing to the economy and enhancing their financial security.

Access to Lifelong Learning:
 Technology provides opportunities for continuous education, allowing older adults to pursue interests, develop new hobbies, or gain knowledge that enhances their quality of life.

Inclusion in Civic Life: With growing reliance on digital platforms for civic engagement, including voting and public consultations, IT skills ensure that older citizens can actively participate in democratic processes.

The Case for Public Investment
Investing in IT training for older people aligns with broader societal goals of inclusion, equality, and economic growth. Key arguments include:

Economic ROI
Empowering older people to participate in the economy can yield substantial returns, both through direct contributions and reduced dependence on public services.

Social Cohesion:
Bridging the digital divide fosters a more inclusive society, ensuring that technological progress benefits all demographics, not just the digitally native.

Healthcare Savings:
Educating older individuals on using health apps and telemedicine services can lead to more proactive health management, reducing strain on the NHS.

Alignment with National Goals:
 A digitally literate population supports the UK's ambition to be a global leader in technology, demonstrating a commitment to leaving no one behind.

Concerns raised about Government prioritisation of AI adoption and data sharing:

In response to publication of the Government's AI Opportunities Action Plan t**he Information Commissioner's Office has warned of the need to preserve data protection standards.**

The aim of the plan is to boost the development and use of AI in the UK public and private sectors to increase efficiency in public services and add new momentum to economic growth. www.gov.uk/government/publications/ai-opportunities-action-plan

Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has told Cabinet ministers to make adoption of AI a top priority for their departments. But Stephen Almond, the ICO's executive director for regulatory risk, while welcoming the plan, cautioned: "Data protection is essential to realising this opportunity and ensuring that the public can have trust in AI."

Gaia Marcus, director of the Ada Lovelace Institute, has also raised concerns. He said: "The public have nuanced and often strong views on the use of their data, particularly in areas such as health."

In light of past backlash against medical data sharing, the Government must continue to think carefully about the circumstances under which this kind of sharing will be acceptable to the public. Greater public engagement and deliberation will help in understanding their views. "The piloting of AI throughout the public sector will have real world impacts on people. We look forward to hearing more about how departments will be incentivised to implement these systems safely as they move at pace, and what provisions will enable the timely sharing of what has worked and – crucially – what hasn't. "Just as the Government is investing heavily in realising the opportunities presented by AI, it must also invest in responding to AI's negative impacts now and in the future.

He stressed it was critical the Government looked beyond a narrow subset of extreme risks and brought forward a credible vehicle and roadmap for addressing broader AI harms. "This will benefit all people at risk of those harms and secure their trust so that the positive impacts of these technologies can be felt widely," he added.

Sir Keir has said a new Digital Centre of Government in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) will place a focus on how AI is used in the public sector, scanning for new ideas, running pilot projects and scaling them as far as they can go.

_____

At long last! A government Digital Inclusion Action Plan

"It's fantastic to see recognition from the heart of Government that urgent and joined-up action is needed to enable millions of people to overcome barriers to good work, good health and realising their full potential." She went on: "As the UK's leading digital inclusion charity, we are delighted to see recognition of the vital role hyper local community organisations and civil society has played in fixing the digital divide, and a clear vision for how the national and devolved Government can amplify and build on that. "This is a major milestone in our push for an inclusive and prosperous society where no-one is left behind."

Jan Shortt, NPC General Secretary, said: "The NPC welcomes the Digital Action Plan from the government and its strategy for funding and promoting inclusion through learning and access to broadband and devices. However, we will hold them to account through the report from the Women & Equalities Select Committee on the Rights of Older People in terms of older people being able to access all services by alternative means other than solely online."

AI use in everyday life

The Good Things Foundation charity has launched a new learning resource on essential AI literacy skills which will help beginners to use AI in everyday life.
https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/discover/digital-inclusion-resources/learning-and-skills/introduction-to-ai

Sharing your NHS data

Single patient record data will be available to researchers by default according to papers seen by Digital Health News. The leaked report ahead of the NHS 10 Year Plan calls for "a wholesale upgrade of technology foundations, progressive replacement of legacy systems, and transformational use of automation and AI to improve productivity and empower patients".
https://www.digitalhealth.net/2025/02/single-patient-record-planned-across-health-and-social-care/

Make it two-way.

Healthcare research body, The King's Fund, has recommended NHS organisations should ensure that existing and new digital platforms, including the NHS App, all provide for two-way communications and are responsive. A co-written report with Healthwatch England and National Voices says administration in the NHS is dysfunctional and is putting some patients off seeking care.
https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/long-reads/lost-in-system-need-for-better-admin

Future of AI?

What does the future of AI really look like? How will it shape the world we live and work in? These are questions which will be discussed at the 7th Public Sector Leaders Week, 10th-14th March. Leaders say AI's future is transformative, reshaping industries with efficiency and innovation. Challenges include data quality and ethical concerns, skills development and careful governance to maximise benefits and mitigate risks.
For more information and to book a place, visit **https://psiweek.digileaders.com/.**

AI summit Paris

At the recent landmark Paris AI Action summit, the UK and the US refused to sign a declaration on "inclusive and sustainable" artificial intelligence which was aiming for a concerted approach to developing and regulating the technology. A UK government spokesperson said the statement had not gone far enough in addressing global governance of AI and the technology's impact on national security.
Gaia Marcus, director of the Ada Lovelace Institute, which focuses on AI research, saying she hoped the UK's move was not a decision to reject "the vital global governance that AI needs."
https://www.ukauthority.com/articles/government-to-develop-digital-inclusion-indicators/

MAKE IT FAIR

As the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill works its way through parliament, on 25th February every national newspaper and many others printed the same front page as part of the Make It Fair campaign launched by a coalition of media, publishing and entertainment organisations.
The campaign calls for existing copyright laws to be upheld so that AI companies are required to declare the source of their training data as well as pay a licence fee for the British-created material they scrape from the internet.
In a letter to The Times Jamie Njoku-Goodwin, a former special adviser to Rishi Sunak and a trained pianist and composer who also previously headed music industry body UK Music, said in a letter to The Times: "AI has incredible potential – it could transform public services and lead to vital medical breakthroughs. But making the most of these opportunities doesn't require us to throw our world-leading creative industries under the bus – which is exactly what this policy does.
"Letting tech companies hoover up the Beatles' back catalogue to train their AI models would not unlock the cure for cancer or revolutionise public services. But it would devastate our creative industries and do irreparable damage to a sector where we are genuinely world-leading."
https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3430