4. Older people are still at risk of digital isolation
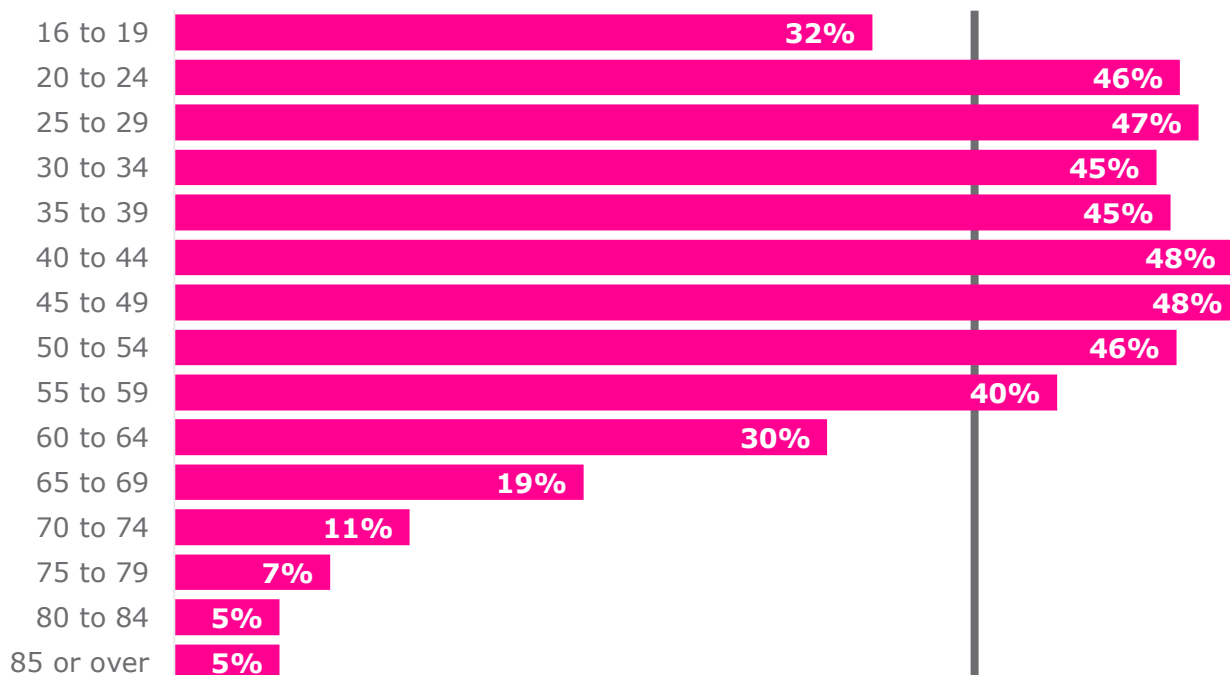
Having advocated for the central role of digital provision in contemporary professional practice, I must also sound a note of caution. While uptake is growing, there are groups of the population who either cannot or do not engage digitally. One of the strongest correlates of this is age. Below age 65 use of the internet is near-universal (at or above 95%), however for older age cohorts, engagement drops rapidly.

Use of the internet: 2023/24

Age	%
65 to 69	90%
70 to 74	85%
75 to 79	75%
80 to 84	59%
85 or over	41%
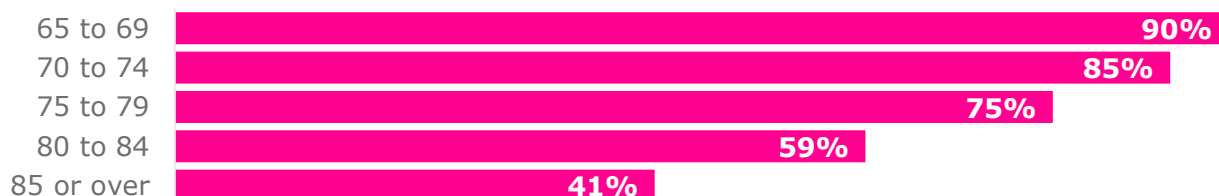
At the same time, older age cohorts are also less likely to have accessed training in digital or online skills. This is partly due to working-age adults being given training within their employment, but it also underscores the broader lack of digital engagement among the oldest adults.

Adults who did digital or online skills training: past 12 months

Age	%
16 to 19	32%
20 to 24	46%
25 to 29	47%
30 to 34	45%
35 to 39	45%
40 to 44	48%
45 to 49	48%
50 to 54	46%
55 to 59	40%
60 to 64	30%
65 to 69	19%
70 to 74	11%
75 to 79	7%
80 to 84	5%
85 or over	5%

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Of course this has much wider ramifications beyond access to culture, Ofcom's 2022 Digital Exclusion Review highlights "ability" alongside "access" and "affordability" as the three key barriers to full participation in a digitally integrated society.[13] The push towards cashless businesses,[14] app-only access to services,[15] and closures of bank branches,[16] all make it more difficult for people who aren't digitally confident to fully participate.

Digital adoption is only accelerating, meaning that those without the right skill set are at increasing risk of being left behind.

What does this mean for sector professionals?

The cultural sector could not (and should not attempt to) stop the adoption of digital tools, but it can treat digital skills as an access consideration. We know that people have different requirements for access to an in-person a visit – from physical mobility to information format and sensory needs. We should see our digital tools and interventions in the same way – practitioners should ask themselves how a range of people can access their digital provision and should be wary of completely removing non-digital tools lest vulnerable audiences are excluded.

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[13] https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5803/ldselect/ldcomm/219/21905.html

[14] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/may/01/the-guardian-view-on-the-cost-of-a-cashless-society-the-most-vulnerable-will-pay

[15] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/aug/20/no-app-no-entry-how-the-digital-world-is-failing-the-non-tech-savvy

[16] https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/closure-of-high-street-banks-impact-on-local-communities