

52) ACCESS TO MEDIA - The latest in a series of articles by Iain Gregory of Caithness CAB

This weekend Liz has been in official residence, which means that I have been under close supervision, thus reducing the time available for my habitual scanning of the media. I did however pick up on the current furore surrounding the decision of Formula 1 to do away with the tradition of having "Grid Girls" at races, with much outrage generated on all sides of the argument. It reminded me of a story from the Eighties, when the England football team was in Germany to play a couple of "friendlies" against the hosts. The night before the first game the English players retired to bed so as to be at peak fitness the next day. In the early hours an "Oompah" band appeared in front of the hotel and the resultant racket meant that no sleep was had. Calls for vengeance were made and the night before the return match an open top London bus, with the upper deck entirely full of "Page 3 girls", appeared in front of the Germans' hotel. Each young lady had a brass instrument and the consequent cacophony, made even worse when the girl with the cymbals suffered an unfortunate and painful accident, woke up the entire neighbourhood. The Polizei were summoned and the journalist in charge was marched in front of the commander and ordered to explain herself. In a moment of utter genius she drew herself up to her full 5'2", clicked her heels, and barked "But Herr Kapitan, we were only obeying orders".

Which brings us nicely to today's topic. Access to media, whether in print, online or via radio and TV, is something many of us take for granted and it enables us to keep abreast of current affairs, (as above for example), to obtain vital data, and, in the internet age, there is often no realistic alternative but to go online. Unfortunately not everyone can use a computer and if money is short it is not always possible to pay for broadband or buy a newspaper and this is becoming an issue. Almost a fifth of people who seek advice from Scottish CABs say they never use the internet, with more than half unable to apply for jobs or benefits online without help, according to new research carried out by our umbrella organisation, Citizens Advice Scotland. This data is a real concern because many social security and justice services are now only or mainly accessible online, which means that a lot of people are not getting the essential support they need. As a matter of fact I wanted to get in touch with a certain department in Whitehall recently and discovered that there was no publicly available telephone number. Also, have you noticed that when you click on "Contact us" on many websites it is becoming very difficult indeed to find a phone number, and often a postal address? (By the way, If you really want to write to a limited company then go to Companies House website, type in the name of the company and all will be revealed. This can be very handy and is no doubt annoying to them).

The survey of over 1,200 Scottish CAB clients found that:

- 34% have no or limited ability to use the internet, with 18% saying they never use it at all
- 20% only have access to it through a smart phone

- 21% don't have an email account
- 64% of benefits claimants need help to apply for their benefits online

When asked what the barriers to internet use were, 18% reported it was the cost of broadband (and I think that is on the low side judging by CCAB feedback), 17% said it was phone costs, and 64% said they had not received any training or support in internet use. 41% of respondents in rural areas reported poor broadband connectivity.

Publishing the report, Citizens Advice Scotland's Policy Manager Keith Dryburgh said:

"These findings clearly show that many Scottish CAB clients still have difficulty using digital services, either through lack of skills or lack of access. While the research also shows that younger people are more proficient than the older age groups, the general picture remains a concern. Although the sample for this survey cannot be said to represent the Scottish population as a whole, it nevertheless indicates that Scotland is not yet at a stage where key services like social security and justice can be moved entirely online without excluding a significant proportion of society from them. We therefore suggest that all key public services should continue to have alternative options (e.g. paper-based systems) available to people who are not able to competently use online services. In the meantime, we commit to working with the Scottish government, Digital Scotland, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and others to improve people's digital skills and levels of digital access"

There is a detailed report titled "Disconnected" which looks at the situation in more detail and the summary makes it clear that "with the world becoming ever more digitised, Scottish citizens are seeing more and more services moving online. There is a risk that people without sufficient access to the internet, or skills to engage with digital content, will be left out. In some instances, this can be to the detriment of their basic and fundamental rights and findings indicate that there are still a significant number of bureaux clients who face digital exclusion. The level of digital exclusion varies between a number of factors including people's age and where they live. A lack of access to hardware and internet services, poor digital skills, the cost of going online, and connectivity issues, are all reasons which contribute to the on-going group of people who are either not online, or unable to access digital services without support."

As I have mentioned before it is impossible to claim some benefit entitlements, and very difficult to obtain important data in many areas, unless you have PC skills and access, and the rush to digital was something we warned about – our view is that telephone and written contact is vital for a large percentage of people and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. At CCAB we do try to be ahead of the game and a few years ago we teamed up with Ormlie Community Association and now provide free - supported - internet access for all. All you have to do is visit Thurso or Wick

CAB and you will get help. We actually find that quite a number of older people have now picked up new skills and are using them to communicate with friends and family abroad and feel much more confident about using a PC. There is also no doubt that there is a serious need for reliable, fast broadband to be made available to everyone in Caithness and this is something we are going to continue to push for. Outside the main towns in the County speeds can be glacial and if the Government want to go entirely digital then we need to have the facilities first along with financial support and training for all. And do not worry if you need an email address. We will create one for you in minutes, so do come and see us.

And on that note Liz tells me that another survey shows that it is good for men to assist their wives with domestic tasks – I am not sure quite where she read that, but I suspect the journalist responsible is probably not male.