PRIME
Protecting Minority Ethnic Communities Online

POLICY BRIEFING

MINORITY ETHNIC COMMUNITIES' ACCESS TO DIGITAL SERVICES IN HEALTH, HOUSING AND ENERGY SECTORS: A CROSS-SECTOR VIEW

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Key findings and policy implications

1. While organisations within each of the three sectors of energy, health and housing vary in terms of readiness, digital maturity and capacity, and experience diverse drivers, there are **clear benefits for consumers, service users, patients and tenants to benefit** from digital advancements.
2. Access to adequate digital devices and internet connectivity, as well as digital upskilling across all sections of the population, including minority ethnic communities, is necessary to optimise the full potential of digitalisation.
3. Standards and levels for services should be established based on the **lived experiences of minority ethnic communities.**
4. Genuine participation in digital services cannot be achieved without design and implementation which ensures equitable access, experiences and outcomes for minority ethnic communities.
5. More attention should be paid to developing cross-sector digital programmes which offer untapped opportunities for improving access to, experiences of, and outcomes of the deeply interconnected areas of health and housing services, and energy supply.

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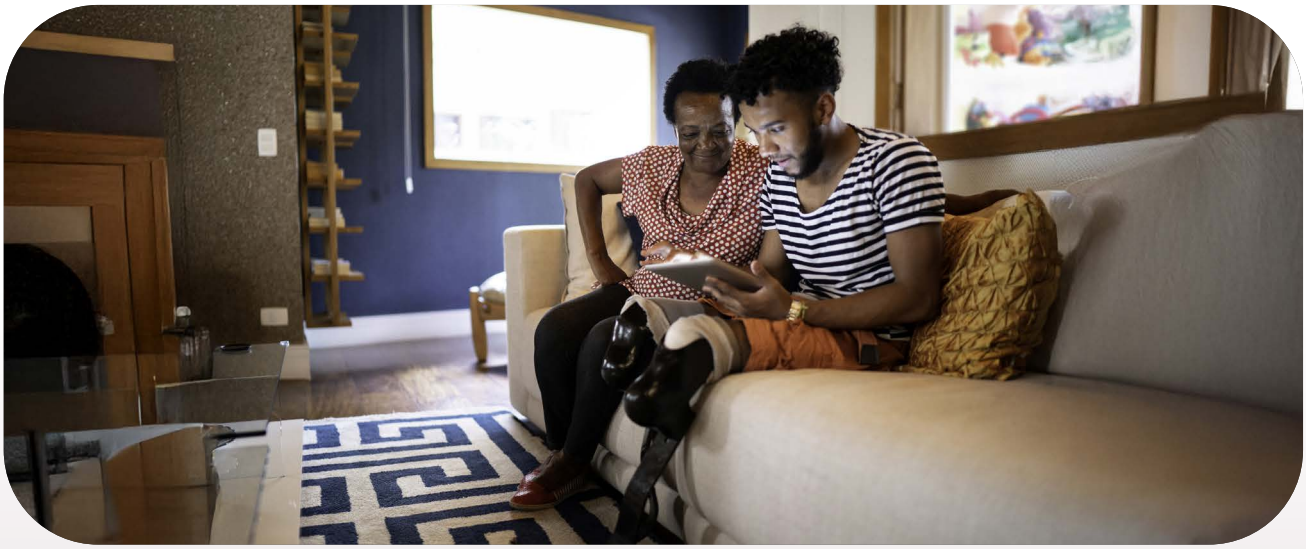
INTRODUCTION

This policy briefing is informed by extensive research – including interviews with minority ethnic individuals and interviews with policy-makers and practitioners – conducted by the UKRI-funded Protecting Minority Ethnic Communities Online (PRIME) project: https://www.primecommunities.online/ PRIME is a collaboration between five universities led by Heriot-Watt University. The project has also engaged extensively with individuals with lived experience who acted in an advisory capacity, community organisations, policy actors and other stakeholders throughout the research process. Launched in April 2022, PRIME has identified the distinctive online harms minority ethnic communities face amidst the rapid digitalisation of primary healthcare, social housing and energy provision, and developed innovative and groundbreaking social and technical tools to empower policymakers, practitioners and regulators to create safer, more equitable online spaces. This briefing focuses on key cross-sector issues.



1 DIVERSE DRIVERS OF DIGITALISATION ACROSS THREE SECTORS AND CAPACITY TO DELIVER EQUITABLE DIGITAL SERVICES AND ENERGY SUPPLY

Drivers of digitalisation are underpinned by ambitious digital strategies at a UK level[1], as well as within the devolved administrations of Scotland[2] and Wales[3]. However, primary research undertaken by the PRIME project revealed varying levels of digital maturity, readiness and capacity across organisations in England and Scotland in the energy, housing and health sectors. The drivers of digitalisation vary across and within sectors, and include to facilitate communication with, and empower customers, tenants and patients, increase process efficiency and progress transition to net zero. While these are all worthy goals, in order to optimise the benefits of digitalisation for all sections of the population, it is essential to consider the capacity of organisations to deliver equitable access to, experiences of and outcomes of digital services, and energy supply.

Here it is worth underscoring the Public Sector Equality Duty set out in the Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 which applies to public sector bodies, including general practices, social housing providers, those they contract services out to and commissioning bodies. This duty places a responsibility on these organisations 'to eliminate unlawful discrimination; advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not and to foster or encourage good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.' Guidance has been produced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission

1 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uks-digital-strategy/uk-digital-strategy

2 https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2021/03/a-changing-nation-how-scotland-will-thrive-in-a-digital-world/documents/a-changing-nation-pdf-version/a-changing-nation-pdf-version/govscot%3Adocument/DigiStrategy.FINAL.APR21.pdf

3 https://www.gov.wales/digital-strategy-overview

(2024) on how to consider equality in policy making: a 10 step guide for public bodies in England[4]. Bearing in mind that minority ethnic households are more likely to be in fuel poverty than white households in England (DESNZ, 2024a), it is also worth noting that the affordability of energy bills is legislated in the Energy Act 2023.

An important component of ensuring the readiness of organisations to implement processes of digital transition is the upskilling of staff involved in such processes. For instance, in a general practice, the skills required by practice managers, receptionists and clinicians in engaging with patients through digital tools are likely to vary. Adding a further layer of complexity, the ability and willingness of staff to engage with an ethnically diverse population across and within organisations in each sector may also vary, indicating the need for investment in developing the social as well as technical infrastructure needed to deliver digital services and cost-efficient energy supply.

4 https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/how-consider-equality-policy-making-10-step-guide-public-bodies-england

2 NEED TO TACKLE DIGITAL POVERTY AND DIGITAL UPSKILLING

As of 2022, there are 28.2 million households in the UK. And yet, 6% of them have no mobile or broadband internet at home (House of Lords, 2023). Attaining access to digital services is a common challenge for many households from minority ethnic backgrounds due to multiple factors which intersect with each other including digital poverty, limited digital literacy and the need for language support. While this is closely linked with educational attainment and income levels, it is noted that Pakistani and Bangladeshi households, followed by individuals categorised as 'Black Other', are more likely to live in the overall most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods[5] in England, increasing the challenge of accessing key services. Similarly, in Scotland, groups categorised as 'African' 'White: Polish' and the 'Other ethnic group' are much more likely to be living in some of the most deprived areas in the nation.[6]

As more and more services are digitalised, these structural inequalities may widen the gap between minority ethnic communities as a whole, and the rest of the population. As highlighted in the United Nations' roadmap for digital cooperation[7], while digital technology has multiple socio-technical facets with huge potential for positive change, it

5 https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/demographics/people-living-in-deprived-neighbourhoods/latest/#full-page-history

6 https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/demographics/people-living-in-deprived-neighbourhoods/latest/#full-page-history

7 https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3864685/files/A_74_821-EN.pdf?ln=en

can also reproduce and amplify existing socio-economic and other inequalities. Issues related to equity in digital tools and solutions, including affordability, usability, data security and risks of misuse and discrimination may be magnified for minority ethnic communities. While digital processes can, in many cases, increase the speed of communication, help further empower sections of the population who are digitally literate and connected, proficient in English and willing to engage with such processes, and ensure that energy supply meets customer demand, primary research indicates that they cannot replace the need for human interaction. This is particularly in areas where privacy may be valued, for instance in disclosing illness, complex needs or financial struggles, and where traditional face to face interaction may be preferred. Where (digital) literacy or proficiency in English is limited, the challenges of engaging directly with digital services may be unsurmountable. Sometimes the most effective way to reach vulnerable sections is by engaging directly with them even if it means going door to door.

3 MONITORING OF SERVICE QUALITY AND THE ROLE OF REGULATION VARIES ACROSS THE SECTORS

According to the 2010 Equality Act, ethnicity is a protected characteristic and it is against the law to discriminate against individuals based on this aspect of their identity, along with eight other protected characteristics[8]. While housing and health have been devolved to Scotland, energy policy is a reserved matter. However, since planning has been devolved to Scotland, the Scottish government has the power to influence the direction of energy generation by approving or refusing new projects[9].

In energy, the regulator, Ofgem, uses more of a stick approach than carrots with regard to support for vulnerable households as suppliers[10] and network operators[11] are assessed on their progress to assist such households. Yet, no regulatory oversight in minority ethnic households' access to digital services exist in the energy sector. This is partly due to lack of data on their access to digital services. Even smart meter statistics do not offer this level of granularity, creating a 'blind spot' in the sector. These limitations raise questions on whether and to what degree minority ethnic households will be able to benefit from digitalisation. Development of data monitoring frameworks which identify their patterns of engagement with digital

8 https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/equality/equality-act-2010/protected-characteristics

9 https://committees.parliament.uk/work/2432/the-impact-of-potential-scottish-independence-on-energy-and-climate-change/

10 https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-10/EC04_SupplierAdmin_GuidanceV1.0.pdf

11 The report for 2022-23 assessment is available here: https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2023-09/2022-23%20SECV%20Panel%20Report%20Update.pdf

products and services is essential for enabling a just transition to net zero.

A similar picture emerges from the health sector, where the Association for British Health Technologies (2021) has highlighted that regulation plays an important role in ensuring timely and sustained access to safe and effective digital health products and services among patients and health professionals, while paying due regard to ethical and data protection considerations, and balancing these against innovation. However multiple challenges need to be overcome within the regulatory system. These include the lack of a single body or unit with responsibility for the overall process, unclear and overlapping remits, doubts about how to regulate aspects of AI, such as machine learning, and the lagging behind of regulation ahead of technological advancements. Within this context, the scope for regulation to play a role in ensuring equitable access to, experiences and outcomes in the use of digital tools and services is unclear.

In the housing sector, where the pace of digitalisation has tended to be slower and more fragmented than in energy and health, the context for ensuring equitable outcomes needs to be viewed within the context of a lack of emphasis on race equality in housing policy in England and on its implementation in Scotland (Robinson, Preece and Robbins et al, 2022). While ethnicity data is collected among many social landlords, its use in monitoring equitable access to social housing, and in the use of digital services is limited. Overall, regulatory systems need to be more nuanced and fit for purpose, to ensure that the benefits of digitalisation are reaped by the whole population, and not limited to the most privileged, socio-economically advantaged sections of society.

4 PARTICIPATION IN DIGITAL SERVICES CANNOT BE ACHIEVED WITHOUT EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORKS.

Digital services should be designed with the needs of the most vulnerable populations in mind so that they are fit for all. The development of materials and service provision needs to build onto feedback from co-design work and co-production with minority ethnic communities, as reflected in the Minoritised Ethnic People's Code of Practice for Equitable Digital Services, which contains principle and recommendations to guide the development of digital services. Underpinned by seven principles – fairness, compassion, user-centred, accessible, transparent, private and secure, and trustworthy – it offers a guide for decision-making about the purpose, design, delivery and use of personal data, to help safeguard against the inequities experienced by individuals in this section of the population in access, experiences and outcomes of these services

Yet, such a change cannot be achieved without an inclusive work force. There is scope for companies to diversify their work force and procurement practices. The Scottish Government's pro-diversity stance in service procurement was mentioned as an example of good practice where if two contractors are equally competitive, the one that facilitates more equitable outcomes is favored.

5 CROSS-SECTOR INTERACTIONS OFFER UNTAPPED OPPORTUNITIES

Digitalisation processes in the energy sector has links with both sectors. In health, warm home prescription trials (Energy Systems Catapult, 2024), delivered in partnership with NHS teams and local energy advisors, resulted in benefits to NHS by reducing health care costs and freeing up beds in hospitals as well as enabling vulnerable and low-income households to keep their homes heated. Yet, how this learning can be implemented widely needs to be worked out, particularly in supporting shifts in health policy towards treating patients in their own homes.

In housing, social housing providers can become more active in facilitating decarbonisation and improving energy efficiency of homes. Social housing associations can work with local authorities in improving the efficiency of homes via the Local Authority and Supplier Flex element of the Energy Company Obligation order (ECO4 Flex[12]). As ECO4 is a means tested benefits programme, ECO4 Flex widens the pool of eligible households by including those that may benefit from energy efficiency improvements. The local authorities or the devolved administrations can identify low-income or vulnerable households and may refer them to an obligated energy supplier.

12 For details, see: https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/environmental-and-social-schemes/energy-company-obligation-eco/support-improving-your-home

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This research draws on multiple primary data sources: 100 narrative interviews with minority ethnic individuals, supplemented by 15 follow-up audio-visual interviews; and interviews and workshops with policy and industry experts across energy, housing and health sectors. To ensure the participation of minority ethnic individuals with language barriers, language support was provided during both the interviews. Discussions with different actors along the supply chain, and senior officials focused on the drawbacks and challenges of ensuring equitable access for minority ethnic communities to access digital energy services. The expert workshops, three sector specific and a cross-sector one, brought experts across industry, policy and academia together. They provided a collaborative platform for stakeholders to exchange ideas and experiences, aiming to capture practical perspectives on addressing ethnicity. The qualitative data was thematically analysed to reveal how ethnicity intersects with other characteristics (e.g., age, gender, language, socio-economic status) to facilitate or hinder minority ethnic communities' access to and engagement with digital energy services.

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4. Association of British Health Technologies (2021) *ABHI White Paper on Digital Health Regulatory Contexts.*
5. Robinson, D, Preece, J and Robbins, G (2022) *Race equality in housing: a review of the po policy approach in England, Scotland and Wales.* UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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For information about PRIME activity and research outputs please visit:

www.primecommunities.online

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