In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK government relied heavily on digital channels to provide public information. This disproportionately excluded older people – one of the groups with least access to (or experience of) using the internet, and one of those hardest hit by COVID-19. Feedback from older people revealed high levels of confusion and fear around the virus, with many feeling overlooked or forgotten. According to an NHS Digital report, around half of the approximately 11.5 million people in the UK that lack digital skills are aged over 65 years. A separate report on digital exclusion found that older people in low-income groups and from marginalized communities were particularly affected.

Ensuring public communications are inclusive – by reaching those not on the internet

In response, the Healthy Ageing Research Group at the University of Manchester collaborated with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority Ageing Hub and the Greater Manchester Older People’s Network to develop Keeping Well at Home, a booklet providing practical advice and support for older people during the COVID-19 restrictions, including guidance on home exercises, maintaining mental well-being, nutrition and hydration, staying connected to others, and fall-prevention.

Distributed via local networks and community groups, the initiative ensured the information shared was evidence-based, for example the physical activity section used content from the internationally recognised Falls Management Exercise Programme and provided guidance on how to get up after a fall, plus local contact numbers for further support. All of this was framed in a way that aimed to reduce (not add to) levels of anxiety, confusion and worry during a time of physical and social distancing.

Print-based communications – not so out-of-date after all...

A survey of 500 booklet recipients saw an overwhelmingly positive response, with 92% agreeing they found the information helpful. Around 50% of respondents did not have access to the internet; 65% agreed that they would not have had access to this information if they hadn’t received the booklet,
and 90% agreed that the booklet had helped older adults to stay healthy during lockdown. When asked about their preference for receiving such information, 92% said they preferred paper-based information sent to the home; of those who had access to the internet, 83% still preferred to receive paper-based information.

Over 66 000 copies were distributed in May 2020 in the Greater Manchester area, whilst a national version of the booklet was also produced. A further 9 local areas in the UK and Northern Ireland have created localised versions. In total, 118 000 copies of Keeping Well at Home have been printed to date, with digital adaptations of the booklets produced internationally, including in Australia and Canada.

Digital copies were made available of the Greater Manchester version and national versions, for easy download and print. Total downloads of the booklet so far are recorded to be 10,000 as of early October 2020.

Building future resilience: tailoring public communication to non-digital users

The experience around the Keeping well at home booklet challenges the growing trend for communicating through digital channels only, and emphasises the need for tailored, print-based materials for older adults. There was a real advantage in amplifying the voices of older people within communications aimed at this age group, and it was found that short quotes from older people made the booklet seem less formal or official, and easier for readers to engage with. The evaluation also highlighted the benefit of bringing together key information on different topics in one place for older people. Feedback showed that readers would have liked additional content on fraud and scams, home hazards and finance.

At national level, Public Health England (a UK government agency) and the Centre for Ageing Better (a UK-led organization managing WHO’s Age Friendly City network) were key stakeholders, demonstrating that multisectoral collaboration can expand the reach of a message. The booklet was used beyond its original purpose and target audience, such as by rehabilitation services as a hospital discharge resource (e.g. post COVID-19 or other related stay) due to the relevance of the content.

Quote: “In Greater Manchester we want to make sure everyone, no matter what their situation, can access the information and advice they need to keep safe and well during the outbreak. Not everyone in the city-region can access the internet and this booklet will go a long way to ensuring that our older residents can find out what they need to do to look after themselves and their family.” Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham

To see a full copy of the booklet and for further information on adaptation, see https://www.manchester.ac.uk/coronavirus-response/coronavirus-home-learning/keeping-well-at-home-guide/