

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Pensioner poverty - digital exclusion

Written Submission by Heriot-Watt University, 21 March 2025

PRIME: Protecting Minority Ethnic Communities Online

Introduction

Over the past few years, we have witnessed a rapid acceleration of digitalisation across both public and private sectors, a phenomenon driven by advancements in technology, evolving consumer expectations, and an increasing need for greater productivity and efficiency. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified this shift, compelling organisations to adopt digital solutions at an unprecedented pace to deliver essential services online.

Digital access to these services, however, is far from equal. Whether it is the lack of digital skills or the lack of connectivity solutions, or digital divide between regions, urban and remote areas, language barriers, or reproduction of structural inequalities in digital systems, there is a well-evidenced gap in accessing these services particularly among minoritised ethnic (ME) communities (also commonly referred to as ethnic minorities or minority ethnic communities or more recently, adversely racialised communities). In this environment, there is a real possibility that the digitalisation of key services will replicate or exacerbate existing inequalities or even create new inequalities or other forms of online harm.

Background

In 2022, the Protecting Minority Ethnic Communities Online (PRIME) project, developed by a consortium of universities led by Heriot-Watt University, set out to tackle these digitalisation challenges.

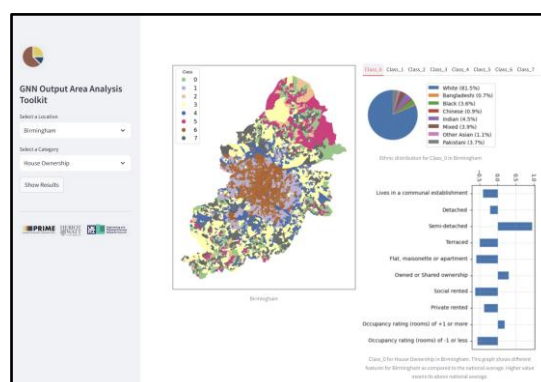
It is an interdisciplinary project which brings together academics from the fields of social science, applied linguistics, computer science and data science. PRIME has produced research, through engagement with ME individuals, policymakers and general managers, which highlights current inequalities for ME communities across several sectors providing vital services, including health, housing and energy sectors, and ways to address them. PRIME has been funded by UK Research and Innovation.

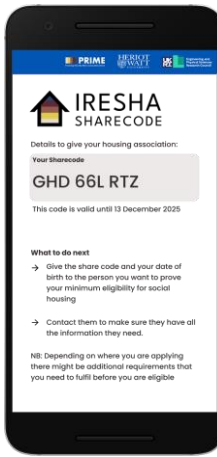
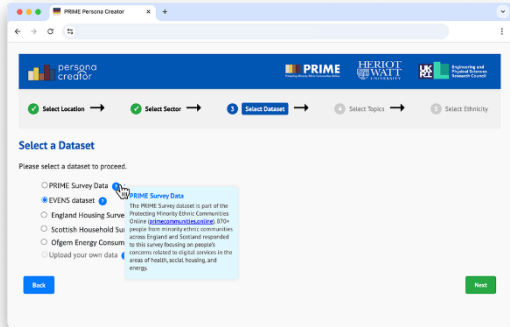
PRIME delivers innovative harm-reduction interventions, processes and technologies to transform online services and create safer spaces for ME communities. This includes a range of policy and technical solutions for public authorities, such as guidelines for regulation, design and delivery of services, educational, training and capacity building resources, as well as practical techniques and tools for service development and improvement. All solutions are available free of charge.

While PRIME's research reflects challenges currently facing ME communities, tackling these issues raised in this research would also help address wider socio-

economic disparities across society. This would help break down barriers, boost opportunity and productivity, ensure that equality is at the heart of UK-wide policies and that the digitalisation of key services is ethically as well as economically driven.

	Key findings	Recommendation
1.	PRIME research has found that many individuals from minoritised ethnic communities face formidable barriers in engaging with housing, health and energy services, particularly those living in poverty.	The design and development of digital services should be guided by ethical principles. We recommend the Minority Ethnic People's Code of Practice which offers a guide to how services could be designed to help safeguard against some of the inequities that minoritised ethnic people experience in access, outcomes, and their experiences of services.
2.	Current methods of classifying the socio-economic status of geographic regions do not make effective use of geographic information, mostly relying on demographic and socio-economic information. This may lead to misleading classification of such areas, resulting in increased difficulty in using public data to inform policy decisions.	We recommend using tools and algorithms that combine geographic, demographic, and socio-economic information to classify regions more effectively. Our tool called GOAAT combines such information and enables policymakers to make informed decisions based on insights on poverty, housing, energy, health, and ethnicity.



<p>3.</p>	<p>Minoritised ethnic people desire for more agency and control over their personal data while using essential online services, as data such as immigration status can introduce bias and discrimination. A secure and convenient approach is needed so that personal data can be collected in a constrained and controlled manner, while preserving privacy.</p>	<p>We see Privacy Enhancing Technologies (PETs) as a solution to mitigating these harms. Our demonstrator PET app, IRESHA Sharecode, for the Social Housing sector, enables ME individuals to provide the least amount of sensitive eligibility data while preserving privacy but still conveying eligibility information to social housing providers.</p> 
<p>4.</p>	<p>Essential services are being rapidly digitised, yet designers and developers often lack insights into the concerns and challenges faced by diverse ME communities accessing these services.</p>	<p>We provide the Persona Creator app, which uses public datasets to create personas. These personas portray real ME community concerns and experiences of online harms, discrimination and bias while using digital services, and their security and privacy concerns.</p> 
<p>5.</p>	<p>Digitalisation of services (health, social housing and energy) should ensure that the current and future digital services are unbiased and non-discriminatory, and meet the requirements of ME communities.</p>	<p>We provide design guidelines that can be used by developers and managers of digital services to assess if these services meet the requirements and needs of ME communities.</p>

Cross-sector challenges

Below is an overview of our research findings and key challenges ME communities face in the health, housing and energy sectors, which provide vital services to all communities.

Health

A key driver for the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments is to reduce current levels of NHS waiting lists. However, since in many areas, people need to access digital services to book online and in-person appointments and be signposted to services, there needs to be sustained investment in digital health infrastructure to meet these goals. Our findings on health included:



- Patient-facing primary health care services have been rapidly digitalised over the past few years, underpinned by digital health and social care strategies in England, Scotland and Wales. Digital services have generated many benefits, however many individuals from minoritised ethnic communities face formidable challenges in engaging with processes of digitalisation, particularly older people.
- Some of the barriers faced include lack of access to digital resources, and lack of support with engaging with digital services. High rates of poverty in some ethnic groups particularly hinder access to digital primary care. Non-digital means of communication (such as telephones and in-person visits) need to continue to be available alongside systems and processes of digitalisation as part of an inclusive and integrated healthcare system.
- Varying levels of support are employed by general practices for ME communities to engage with digital services, for instance through employing bilingual staff in areas where these communities are concentrated. However, increased responsiveness within the NHS is required to support these individuals, alongside the continued availability of non-digital means of accessing and using digital services. Greater recognition of the varying abilities of individuals to read and write English plays a vital role in enabling individuals to engage with digital primary care services.
- The standard use of English in digital communication without access to language support in many general practices needs to be urgently reviewed to ensure equal access to primary health care and reduce health disparities.
- Incorporating authentic and meaningful processes of co-design and coproduction in digital systems, processes and tools will enhance the affordability, accessibility, appropriateness and linguistic sensitivity of health care to ME communities and contribute to early diagnosis and treatment. Such processes would also help to cultivate trust in digital services and could be facilitated by collaborating with community organisations.

- Data collection and management protocols need to incorporate appropriate safeguards to address ME individuals' concerns that information collected through processes of digitalisation, particularly ethnicity data, could be used to discriminate against them, for surveillance or otherwise threaten their safety and privacy, for instance, through data breaches. Privacy-enhancing technologies which are co-designed and evaluated with individuals from minoritised ethnic communities and the organisations which work with them play an important role in addressing such concerns.



Housing

On housing, the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments wish to expand the supply of housing, but it needs to be appropriate to local needs and address deprivation. Housing services are vital to ME communities, so they need access to high quality digital tools and in-person support. Our findings on housing included:

- Aspirations to increase efficiency and ration resources are key drivers for the digitalisation of social housing services. These services vary considerably in terms of quality and inclusivity, highlighting the need for designing digital systems which progress equitability. The development of a national digital social housing strategy will help to counter the current fragmentation of digital services in the sector. Currently, the use of digital services by individuals from minoritised ethnic communities is low. More attention is needed to widen access to such services and to provide alternative methods of communication for individuals who are unable to engage such services.
- Understanding and implementation of effective community engagement varies among social landlords, with some pockets of good practice, for example, the provision of various forms of language support. Engaging with diverse communities is key to addressing significant support gaps in the inclusivity of digital services and paving the way for the co-design and co-production of these services.
- Greater understanding of the capacity of ME individuals to engage with digital services is needed to achieve equitable access, use and outcomes for all. Some individuals from these communities face formidable challenges in accessing and using key services due to digital poverty, lack of proficiency in English and limited digital literacy, as well as through the complex ways these factors interact with each other.
- Enhanced understanding of how to sensitively and regularly collect, use and publish ethnicity data is needed to engage and build trust among ME communities. Regular monitoring by ethnicity of the use and outcomes of digital services, as well as more traditional services will enable social landlords to demonstrate delivery of fair and equitable services and meet the public sector equality duty.

- Regulation plays an important role in ensuring a consistent focus on promoting race equality through digital, as well as other services in social housing. The development of an anti-racist digital housing strategy, underpinned by clear evaluative criteria, would help tackle existing inequalities and reduce the possibility of widening inequalities within the housing sector as digital services continue to be rolled out.

Energy

While UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments are committed to moving towards net zero and decarbonising the economy, the current high costs of energy, which remain high compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, continue to impact ME communities. Our findings on energy included:



- Digitalisation is central to affordable, secure and decarbonised supply of energy by optimising supply and demand in near real time. While affordability of energy bills is legislated in the new Energy Act 2023, ME communities are more likely to experience fuel poverty than the rest of the population. This raises the question of whether and to what degree they stand to benefit from increasing digitalisation, unless targeted measures are developed to counter current inequalities.
- To what extent and in what ways ME communities take part in current digital services is not known, creating the ‘blind spot’ of the sector. Such data is not collected by suppliers while network operators have better visibility of spatial clustering of ME communities within their regions. More attention needs to be paid to developing systems which capture ethnically disaggregated data to ensure just energy transitions.
- ME communities face multiple barriers in accessing digital energy services, including language, age, economic factors and lack of trust that limit engagement with digital platforms which need to be taken account of in developing equitable digital systems, processes and products.
- Selective offer of tariffs in different postcodes has implications on the availability of choices to consumers and signal risks for customer discrimination. This is a concern particularly for minoritised ethnic communities who are more likely to live in deprived areas. The assessment of consumer vulnerability programmes needs to recognise to what degree customers living in deprived areas are included.
- Existing efforts remain insufficient and fragmented. Partnerships between network operators, suppliers, and community organisations are essential to ensuring ME communities receive the necessary support and are not left behind in the transition to net zero.

References

This document draws on the following publications:

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3. Hasan, S., Netto, G., Rizvi, M., & Menezes, D. (2024). Advancing equitable outcomes through digital social housing for minoritised ethnic individuals. <https://doi.org/10.17861/gn21-za96>
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