Barriers to accessing justice in the West of England

**INTRODUCTION**

This analysis makes up the West of England’s contribution to the Access to Justice research report (Work Package 1). It focuses on contextual demographic and geospatial data to identify where residents of the region may face barriers to accessing legal provision and the justice system more widely.

The West of England is a diverse region with a wide variety of people who face different barriers when accessing justice. Some of these may include:

* Long-term health conditions or disabilities
* Below-average level of education
* Belonging to a minority ethnic group or being born outside the UK
* Unemployment, claiming out-of-work benefits, or low income
* Geographic factors such as deprivation, remoteness, and rurality
* Digital skills and access, including broadband coverage
* Legal aid provision in the region

Most of the data sources used are open source are comparable for across England and Wales so that this analysis can be replicated and developed further. Where this is not the case the relevant documentation will be provided in the files accompanying this analysis.

**REGIONAL DEMOGRAPHICS**[[1]](#footnote-1)

948,400 people aged 16 or older live in the West of England region. Many of these people will need access to legal provision at some point in their lives, but some people will find it more difficult to access it than others. They may not have the knowledge or skills to access it, they may not be able to afford it, they may face discrimination or need extra support due to immigration status.

324,000 people (34%) aged 16 or older in the West of England have a health condition/illness lasting more than 12 months. This includes people who may need extra support when accessing the justice system due to disability or challenges with physical or digital access. This affects 40% of adult Bristol residents, higher than both national and regional levels.

126,400 people aged 16-64 (17%) don’t hold any qualification at NVQ Level 2 or higher. They may be less aware of how the justice system works and what resource and information is available to help navigate it. This affects the most people in North Somerset, at 22% of the working age population.

West of England

South West

Great Britain

The West of England has a higher proportion of BAME residents (76,400) and residents born outside the UK (131,000) than the South West region generally, though at lower levels than seen nationally. Bristol, however, matches or exceeds national proportions in both these categories, and North Somerset has notably fewer BAME or foreign-born residents than other West of England local authorities.

West of England

South West

Great Britain

Unemployment (2.3%, 22,1000 people aged 16 and older) and out-of-work benefit claimants (26,475)[[2]](#footnote-2) in the West of England are in line with regional figures. However, they are lower in individual local authorities except Bristol, where they approach national levels. Full time workers in the West of England are paid, on average, £610.80 per week (gross)[[3]](#footnote-3). Average pay is higher than across the South West but a little lower than national levels. People who are out of work or have low pay may find it harder to access the justice system.

It is not just individual characteristics that affects what barriers people may face when accessing the justice system, but also the characteristics of the area in which you live. For example, being able to pay for legal provision does not fix the effects of having few digital skills or living far away geographically from the closest provision.

Map

Description automatically generated**DEPRIVATION[[4]](#footnote-4)**

84,200 residents of the West of England live in the most deprived 10% of areas nationally. As shown in the map on the right, many of these areas are clustered in South and East Bristol, the Avonmouth area, and around Weston-Super-Mare.

The overall deprivation metric covers a variety of domains, notably income and employment but also neighbourhood crime and access to healthcare and education. Overall, people living in deprived areas face more barriers to accessing justice than those who do not. The most deprived areas tend to cluster in more urban areas, however, so physical access may be less of an issue.

The English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and the Welsh IMD are calculated by different bodies using different data, so while they measure broadly the same thing, no direct comparisons between English and Welsh neighbourhoods should be made.

**DIGITAL ACCESS AND SKILLS[[5]](#footnote-5)**

People who lack digital skills or access may find it harder to find information on and participate in the justice system, especially where providers have transitioned partially or completely to online delivery in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. For context, 5% of adults (44,000 adults) in the West of England were non-internet users in 2021, which compares to 8% for the UK[[6]](#footnote-6). 25% of adults in the South West lack the Essential Digital Skills for Life, more than the UK figure of 21%[[7]](#footnote-7).

Map

Description automatically generatedThe Digital Exclusion Risk Index (DERI) maps areas where residents are at higher risk of this, through combining demographic, deprivation, and broadband connectivity data into a risk score for each neighbourhood. This dataset covers England, Wales, and Scotland, though it must use the deprivation score from only one country as a baseline. The score can also be adjusted for comparison within a local authority, within a single country, or across all of Great Britain. The below map uses GB-adjusted DERI scores based on the English IMD, divided into deciles from 1 (lowest risk) to 10 (highest risk) within the West of England.

222,500 people live in the 20% of areas at highest risk of digital exclusion within the region. Contrary to the IMD, digital exclusion risk is more evenly split between rural and urban areas, as neighbourhoods further from urban areas are more likely to have an older-skewing demographic and slower broadband speeds. There is some overlap – 130,800 people, or 11% of the region’s population, live in areas that are both very deprived and have high risk of digital exclusion.

Map

Description automatically generatedWe can get further insight on how people living in certain areas use technology and the web to access information and services with the Internet User Classification (IUC) **[[8]](#footnote-8)**. The classifications we would think of as ‘digitally excluded’ are the e-Withdrawn, Passive and Uncommitted Users, and Settled Offline Communities groups. 262,400 people in the West of England live in a neighbourhood classified as one of these three groups. People living in these areas own fewer devices, access the internet less frequently, and search for information and services with lower frequency than people who live in other areas.

As seen in the map above, there is significant overlap between ‘digitally excluded’ areas according to the UCE and high area DERI scores. This is especially the case for e-Withdrawn areas in the West of England, all of which fall into the 10% of areas in the region at highest risk of digital exclusion. All of these areas are also in the most deprived 10% of areas nationally. People who live in these areas face multiple barriers to accessing the justice system.

Both DERI and IUC data are publicly available and cover England and Wales.

**GEOGRAPHICAL REMOTENESS[[9]](#footnote-9)**

There are 56 legal aid providers in the West of England region, 40 of which are located in Bristol. Legal aid is most readily available across the region in the Family (22 providers) and Crime (16 providers) sectors. Only Family, Crime, Clinical Negligence, Community Care, Debt, Housing, and Mental Health legal aid is available at any provider outside of Bristol. Excluding Family and Crime, this is limited to a single provider.

The fact that the physical locations of legal aid providers in the West of England are so heavily clustered in Bristol has implication for how easy it is to access legal aid for people who do not live close by. 682,600 people in the region live further than 2km by road (approx. a 30-minute walk) from the nearest legal aid provider. Of these people, 58,000 live further than 10km by road (approx. a 30-minute drive) from the nearest provider.

Map

Description automatically generated

The road distance calculations for this analysis were done in-house but all other data is publicly available and covers both England and Wales. Distance from legal aid providers in local authorities bordering the West of England was also calculated but were not relevant in this case.

**HOW DO THESE BARRIERS INTERACT?[[10]](#footnote-10)**

82% of the population of the West of England may find it harder to access the justice system due to digital exclusion, deprivation, or geographical distance – nearly a million people. Approximately a quarter of these people face barriers in at least two of these areas, and 92,000 people (8% of the region’s population) face barriers in all three. People who live in these places may find it extremely difficult to access and navigate the justice system. The areas where this is the case cluster together in several locations across the region, signposting where intervention to improve access to justice may be helpful.

Map

Description automatically generated

The disadvantage faced by people living in these areas is clear – in the 2011 Census, the unemployment rate in the dark grey regions on the map above was nearly twice that of the West of England as a whole. The proportion of households that were deprived in at least two dimensions was twice as high, and the percentage of people with no qualifications higher than an NVQ Level 2 was 70% higher than the regional figure. 36% of households had no access to a car or van (compared to the regional figure of 22%), which will multiply the effect of geographical distance from the physical infrastructure of the justice system. People living in these areas are more likely to be White British and UK-born, likely a function of BAME and migrant populations being more likely to be found closer to urban centres.

The dark grey regions on the map above identify these neighbourhoods – **South Bristol**, sections of the **Brislington**, **Shirehampton**, and **Southmead** areas, sections of **Patchway** and **Weston-Super-Mare**, and part of the **Newbridge** area in Bath, to name a few. Further information on the number of people who face different combinations of barriers can be found in the appendix to this document.

**APPENDIX**

Number of people in the West of England who face different barriers to accessing justice

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Not deprived or at high risk of digital exclusion* | *At high risk of digital exclusion* | *Deprived* | *Both at high risk of digital exclusion and deprived* | ***Total*** |
| *<2km by road from nearest legal aid centre* | 208,040 | 31,452 | 121,160 | 122,356 | 483,008 |
| *2-10km by road from nearest legal aid centre* | 456,252 | 51,308 | 25,163 | 91,866 | 624,589 |
| *>10km by road from nearest legal aid centre* | 53,903 | 4,113 | - | - | 58,016 |
| ***Total*** | 718,195 | 86,873 | 146,323 | 214,222 | 1,165,613 |

Percentage of of people in the West of England who face different barriers to accessing justice

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Not deprived or at high risk of digital exclusion* | *At high risk of digital exclusion* | *Deprived* | *Both at high risk of digital exclusion and deprived* | ***Total*** |
| *<2km by road from nearest legal aid centre* | 17.8% | 2.7% | 10.4% | 10.5% | 41.4% |
| *2-10km by road from nearest legal aid centre* | 39.1% | 4.4% | 2.2% | 7.9% | 53.6% |
| *>10km by road from nearest legal aid centre* | 4.6% | 0.4% | - | - | 5.0% |
| ***Total*** | 61.6% | 7.5% | 12.6% | 18.4% | 100.0% |

1. ONS Annual Population Survey and Labour Force Survey, year ending July 2021. NVQ data refers to year ending December 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ONS Claimant Count, October 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. DLUHC, English Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Digital Exclusion Risk Index V1.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ONS, Internet users, UK: 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lloyds Bank, Essential Digital Skills Report 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Alexiou, A. and Singleton, A. (2018). The 2018 Internet User Classification. ESRC CDRC. Contains National Statistics data Crown copyright and database right (2017); Contains Ofcom data (2016). Contains CDRC data from Data Partners (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Legal Aid Agency, Directory of Providers, as at 29/12/2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ONS, 2011 Census. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)