



Audit Scotland report: Tackling digital exclusion

Date of meeting 29 November 2024

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Report by Chief Executive

1. Object of report

To advise the Committee on the publication of an Audit Scotland report titled '*Tackling digital exclusion*' and outline SPT's response to the key messages and recommendations contained therein.

2. Background to report

The Audit Scotland report says that as more key services move online, all public bodies must deliver on their responsibilities to ensure everyone can access the services they need. This includes the one in six Scottish adults who lack the digital skills needed for everyday life. Public bodies must make better use of technology to deliver services. Done well it gives people greater flexibility whilst reducing costs to service providers. Some people are being left behind as more services move online and reliance on digital technology increases, causing unintended harms and further widening inequalities.

The Audit Scotland report adds that all public bodies have a responsibility, they need to do more to support people to use digital tools in a way that benefits them and make sure they can access the services they need. Failing to do so intensifies the impacts felt by already vulnerable people due to poverty, age or because they have a disability. They need to consider the estimated 15 per cent of adults who do not have digital skills and those living in the nine per cent of homes without internet access.

The Audit Scotland report adds that the Scottish Government had previously worked well with Councils and the third sector to tackle digital exclusion, notably at the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020. Then £50 million was invested to provide access to devices, data, and skills. But since then, momentum has slowed, national leadership weakened, with less funding available. To help mitigate the harms caused by inequalities, by the end of 2024/2025 the Scottish Government and COSLA need to develop a clear action plan, with clarity on leadership, roles, and responsibilities. This must also include detail about the funding needed and available to deliver this plan. This is vital, it is currently unclear across local and Scottish Government, and the third sector, who is responsible for delivering Scotland's national digital strategy.

The Audit Scotland report can be found at: https://audit.scot/uploads/2024-08/nr_240822_tackling_digital_exclusion.pdf

3. Outline of proposals

The key messages from the report are:

1. Digital technology has brought benefits to many of Scotland's people and communities. When used well it can help improve public services, helping change how they are delivered to better meet people's needs. Digital approaches offer opportunities for significant efficiencies and improved accessibility and are vital to making sure public services remain affordable;
2. In an increasingly digital world not everyone can get the services and support they need or are entitled to. Digital exclusion affects people who do not have or can't afford a suitable digital device, internet connection or data package, or do not have the skills and confidence to use digital technology. It is estimated that one adult in every six lacks essential digital skills for everyday life, and nine per cent of Scotland's households do not have an internet connection;
3. This has a severe impact on some people's lives, which public bodies are often not aware of or do not consider when moving services online. It limits people's access to services, life opportunities and quality of life. This affects their social, economic, and financial wellbeing, and can reduce trust in government and public services. The most vulnerable groups of society are often most affected, including people in poverty, older people, and disabled people;
4. The public sector response to digital exclusion increased significantly during the pandemic. The Scottish Government worked well with councils and the third sector to provide an emergency response, such as lifeline support for 61,000 vulnerable households through the Connecting Scotland programme. It invested £50 million in access to devices, data and skills as the world moved online;
5. National leadership for tackling this critical issue has weakened since then and momentum has now slowed. A national digital strategy, launched in March 2021, outlined an ambition to *'leave no one behind'* but lacks a clear action plan and it is unclear who is responsible for delivery. While there are some good examples of public bodies enabling digital inclusion in the online delivery of services, elsewhere not enough is being done to ensure the needs of all users are sufficiently considered;
6. Significant pressures on public finances mean that the Scottish Government and Councils are making difficult choices about public spending priorities, including reducing the direct investment in tackling digital exclusion. The impact of these reductions on the Scottish Government's and Councils' ability to tackle digital exclusion, and its present position in the Scottish Government's priorities has still to be addressed. A planned refresh of the digital strategy provides an opportunity for policy ambitions on digital exclusion, backed up by credible plans, to be made clear;
7. All public bodies have a responsibility for enabling digital inclusion in their programmes for reform. These will only be effective if everyone is included and can access the services they need. Our audit identified many of the practical steps that public bodies must take as they work to bring in new technology, to address exclusion more effectively. Key to this is understanding the full range of people's needs, addressing these through the design of online services and coordinating efforts across different public and third sector bodies.

The recommendations contained in the report are:

By the end of 2024/2025, the Scottish Government and COSLA should do the following:

- Set out their ambitions for tackling digital exclusion in a refreshed digital strategy and develop a clear action plan for reducing digital exclusion, making use of existing work in this area, and addressing the range of different causes of such exclusion. This includes setting out outcomes, responsibilities across the public sector, and approaches to collaboration with the third and private sectors;
- Review and refocus governance arrangements including the roles and responsibilities of different groups in the oversight of progress and in reporting;
- Set up a community of learning on increasing digital inclusion to coordinate activity across sectors and share resources, tools, and good practice.

The Scottish Government should do the following:

- Consider their funding priorities and funding requirements for an updated digital strategy and plan for tackling digital exclusion as part of medium-term financial planning;
- Coordinate approaches to digital inclusion across government departments and policy areas to get the best out of limited resources;
- Work with the UK Government, the Office of Communications (Ofcom), and internet and mobile phone providers to explore ways to promote and improve access to social tariffs.

COSLA should do the following:

- Set out a clear commitment and actions to support Councils in developing and implementing digital inclusion strategies, including the role of the Local Government Digital Office.

All public bodies, including the Scottish Government, Councils, NHS boards and others should do the following:

- Build digital inclusion considerations into strategies and design for digital services and reform, aligned with Scottish Digital Services Standards, and carry out equality and human rights impact assessments.
- Provide clear digital and non-digital methods people can use to access the services they need, such as telephone numbers or access to additional support and assisted digital options.

Councils should do the following:

- Work with partners to develop a clear approach to tackling digital exclusion as part of their strategies and plans, based on an understanding of digital exclusion locally, who is affected and how. They should map out local resources and assets across the public, private and third sectors, and provide clear routes to digital support and accessible information on the support available to local communities.

SPT's response to the Audit Scotland report

The Strategy & Programmes committee at its meeting on 24 November 2023 approved the SPT Digital Strategy 2024 – 2027.

SPT provides digital and non-digital methods people can use to access the services they need, including telephone numbers and access to additional support.

4. Committee action

The Committee is recommended to note the contents of this report, and the Audit Scotland report titled *'Tackling digital exclusion'* and SPT's response to the key messages and recommendations therein.

5. Consequences

Policy consequences	<i>None.</i>
Legal consequences	<i>None.</i>
Financial consequences	<i>None.</i>
Personnel consequences	<i>None.</i>
Equalities consequences	<i>None.</i>
Risk consequences	<i>None.</i>
Climate Change, Adaptation & Carbon consequences	<i>None.</i>

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