

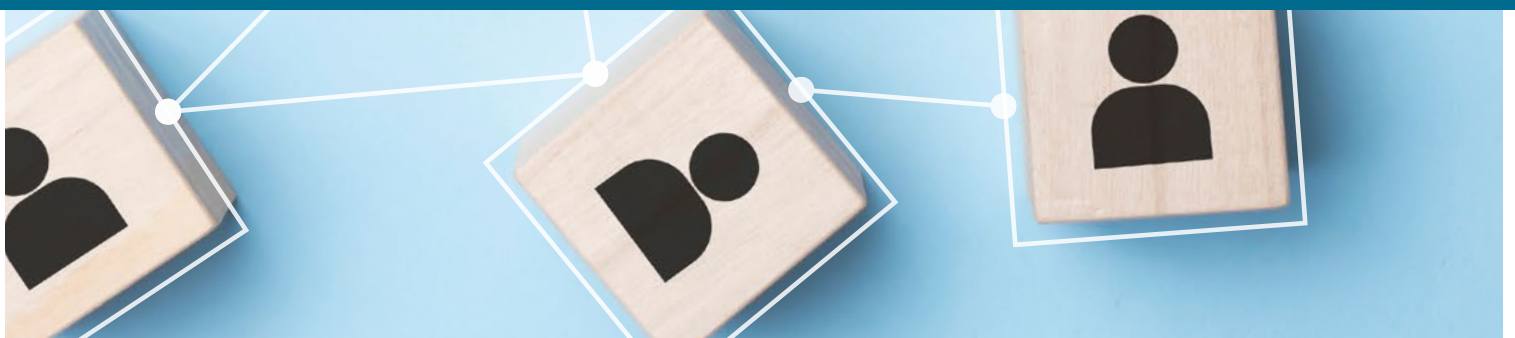
Tackling digital exclusion



ACCOUNTS COMMISSION 

AUDITOR GENERAL 

Prepared by Audit Scotland
August 2024



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Accessibility

You can find out more and read this report using assistive technology on our website www.audit.scot/accessibility.

Audit team

The core audit team consisted of:
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under the direction of
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Key messages

Digital exclusion can have a severe impact on people's lives. For public service reform to be effective it needs to make sure that digitalisation leaves no one behind.

- 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 don't 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 But 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.
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Recommendations

By the end of 2024/25, 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.

Introduction

The use of digital technology to deliver services – public and private – increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. As this trend continues, there is a risk that people who do not use or have difficulty using digital technology will be unable to access the services they need.

Background

1. Digital technology plays an essential role in people's lives – for working and learning, accessing public services, shopping, playing, leisure, and connecting with others. It also brings benefits to both public and private organisations with the efficiencies it can create.

2. As we highlight in our [Digital e-hub](#), the Covid-19 pandemic greatly accelerated the speed of services moving online and increased the overall use of digital technology. From public services, such as health, education, and social security, to private services, such as business, banking, and retail, services are moving online. This means that access to digital technology is increasingly a requirement for participating fully in society.

3. We reported on digital transformation within the public sector in [Enabling digital government](#) in 2019 and [Digital progress in local government](#) in 2021. The needs of people who use digital services should be at the heart of public service reform and service design. These messages reflect the [Christie Commission on the future delivery of public services](#) in 2011 and remain relevant over a decade on.

4. Scotland's public finances are facing increasing challenges and risks. In 2023 and 2024, we highlighted the financial pressures and sustainability risks for [councils](#) and the [NHS](#), and the pressing need for radical change more widely across [public services](#). Digital technology is central to the public service reform that is needed and a cost-efficient way to transform public services to meet these challenges.

5. The Scottish Government [recognises](#) the central role that digital can play to enable public services 'to do the things they do best – helping people'. But in transforming services, public bodies risk doing the opposite unless the needs of all those who rely on them are put at the forefront of that reform.

6. Digital exclusion is strongly associated with poverty and people with certain protected characteristics. This means that it is critical that those most at risk from digital exclusion are not further disadvantaged by



Digital Technology refers to digital devices, systems and services that generate, store and process data. Examples include computers, smartphones, tablets, websites and mobile applications.

barriers to accessing online services or a lack of non-digital alternatives. Digital exclusion can also make it difficult for people to fully realise their human and legal rights.

About this audit

7. The overall aim of this audit was to consider how well public bodies understand digital exclusion and are taking action to reduce it. This report is in three parts and aims to inform, provide assurance, and support improvement:

- Inform: [Part 1. What is digital exclusion?](#)
- Assess/assure: [Part 2. How well is the public sector tackling digital exclusion?](#)
- Improve: [Part 3. Enabling digital inclusion.](#)

8. The audit did not include detailed consideration of the **R100** programme or other broadband connectivity programmes. Previous reports on this can be found on our [Digital e-hub](#). The audit also does not consider digital skills of staff in detail.

9. We have also produced a printable flyer, an easy-to-read report and a checklist for boards and elected members. These resources and this report can be found on our [website](#) or requested in paper format by contacting us by telephone on 0131 625 1500.

10. Our findings are based on evidence from sources including:

- a series of focus groups with people who have experience of accessing digital services and some of the difficulties this can present
- discussions with third sector organisations that work with people at risk of digital exclusion
- interviews with public sector staff from central and local government
- analysis of data and research on digital exclusion
- review of documents provided by the Scottish Government, local government, other public sector and third sector organisations.

11. The audit took a [human rights-based approach](#). This allowed people with experience of digital exclusion and use of digital services to participate in and inform the audit. This work helped us to decide what we asked public bodies, and refer to the issues and views of people experiencing digital exclusion.

12. The [Appendix](#) has further information about the evidence sources we used, the lived experience work and the human rights-based approach we took.



R100 is a Scottish Government programme that aims to deliver the government's commitment to ensure every home and business in Scotland can access superfast broadband

1. What is digital exclusion?

Digital exclusion is a complex issue that affects people who do not or cannot fully use digital technology. Public bodies can cause and increase digital exclusion when they do not adequately take account of people's needs.

Digital exclusion affects people in different ways

13. Digital exclusion can change over time (sometimes digital exclusion is also called **digital poverty**). It affects people who:

- are unable to afford an appropriate device or internet connection
- do not have the skills and confidence to use digital technology
- have a fear or mistrust of using online services or lack the motivation to do it
- have difficulty in accessing digital services and devices or an internet connection
- are unable to keep up with the pace of change of digital technology.



Digital Poverty Alliance defines **digital poverty** as 'the inability to interact with the online world fully, when, where and how an individual needs to'.

'The inability of someone to access the digital space in an equitable way.'

Audit Scotland focus group attendee on the definition of digital exclusion

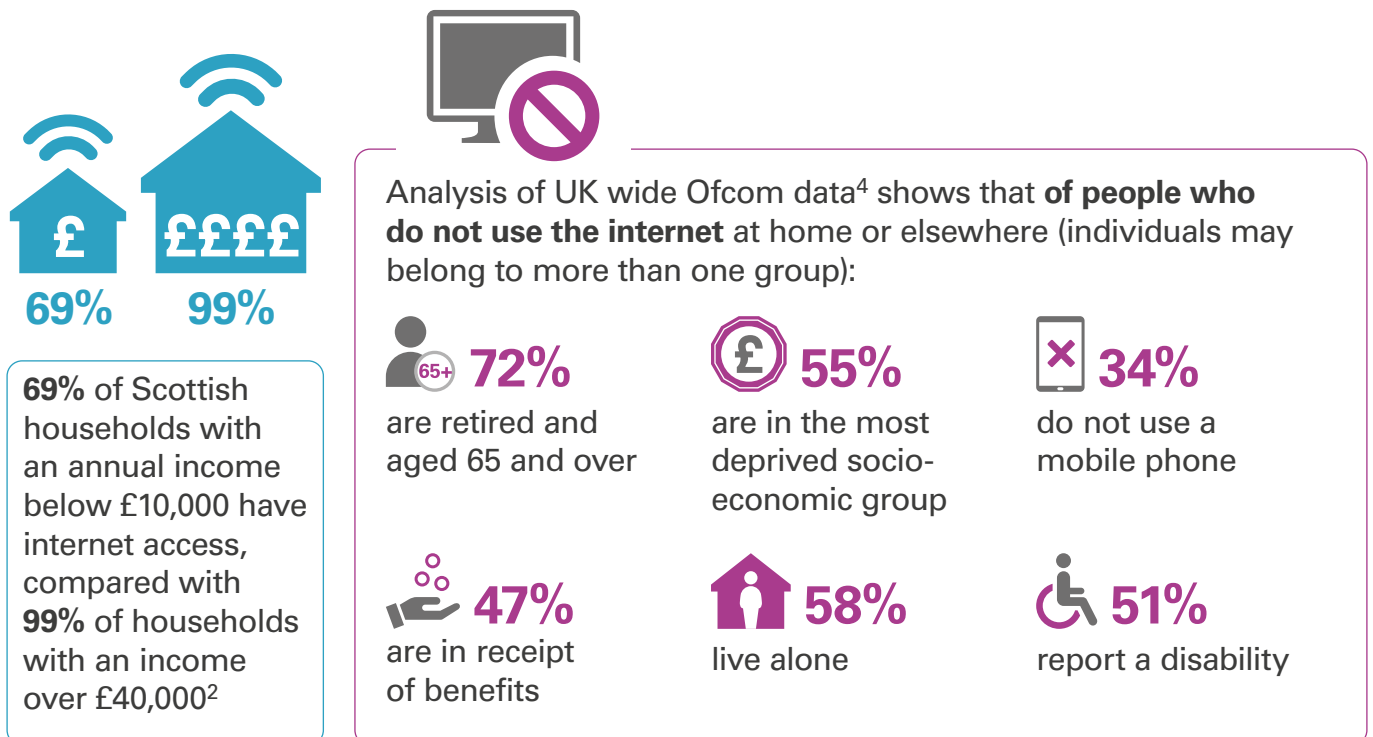
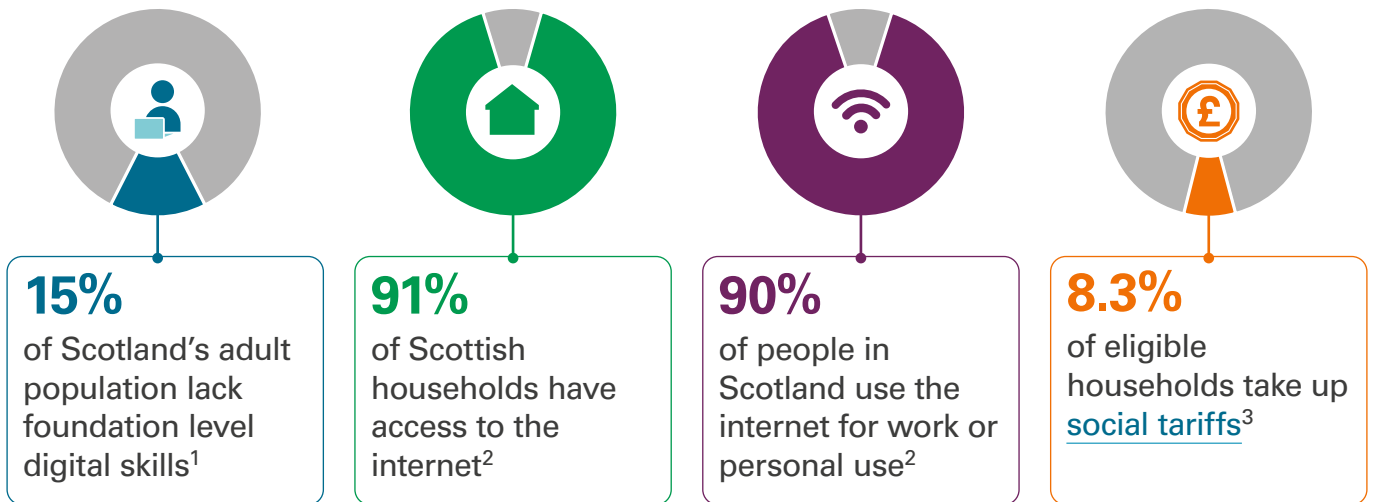
Digital exclusion affects people who are more reliant on public services and who already face disadvantage

14. It is estimated that 15 per cent of Scotland's adults lack the digital 'foundation skills' to do things like turn on a digital device, connect to the internet, use a browser, or update a password.¹ An estimated 14 per cent are also unable to afford sufficient, private, and secure access to the internet.² The most recent data from the Scottish Household Survey shows that 91 per cent of households have access to the internet.³ [Exhibit 1 \(page 10\)](#) provides a summary of the key available statistics on digital exclusion.

Exhibit 1.

Key statistics on digital exclusion

Digital exclusion affects people in different ways and in particular affects those already facing disadvantage.



Notes:

1. [Essential Digital Skills data tables](#), Lloyds Bank, November 2023.
2. [Scottish Household Survey 2022: Key Findings](#), Scottish Government, December 2023.
3. [Pricing trends for communications services in the UK](#), Ofcom December, 2023.
4. [Ofcom UK Adult Media Literacy Survey](#), 2022.

Source: Audit Scotland analysis

15. While the total number of people using and accessing the internet has increased in recent years, the proportion of people without the skills to use it has remained the same. At the same time the level of difficulty of tasks that people must perform online to access services has increased.

16. Poverty and other financial difficulties are a major cause of digital exclusion, with those on lower incomes and living in areas of high deprivation less likely to have access to the internet. Age is also a key factor with people who are retired and aged over 65 years less likely to use the internet. People with disabilities, people who live alone and people who receive benefits are also less likely to use the internet.

17. These groups of society already face disadvantage and are more reliant on public services. This can have further negative impacts where their needs have not been fully considered.

'I feel like there is a lot going on and I just can't be a part of it. It's not that I don't want to be a part of it, I just don't know how to get started and everything will just continue on without me.'

Audit Scotland focus group attendee on the impact of being digitally excluded

A lack of digital access can have a negative impact on people's lives

18. Digital exclusion matters. It can affect people's access to services, social connections, health, and economic and financial wellbeing. Consequences for people include:

- making it harder to access services and information
- making it more difficult to search for and apply for jobs online and reducing employment opportunities
- making it more difficult for parents to engage with children's education
- preventing people from shopping around online for more affordable prices on different products including internet connectivity
- incurring debts or being unable to make payments if they lack the skills and confidence to use online payment methods
- increasing social isolation.

19. There is a risk that people unable to use digital options receive a lower level of service than those who can. For example, people who are unable to use new digital services such as the NHS video consultation service Near Me, can experience longer waits for face-to-face appointments than those able to access the Near Me service.

20. Moving services online can be cost effective for organisations and benefit people who have the means and the skills to access and use digital technology. However, it can also exclude people from accessing the services they need or have a right to.

Poor or limited connectivity can prevent rural communities from participating in the digital economy and society

21. Rural communities are particularly affected by poor connectivity. Residents in rural Scotland have 79 per cent coverage of superfast broadband compared to 99 per cent for those in urban areas.⁴ We heard how poor connectivity can reduce access to public services, restrict opportunities for young people, and prevent small business start-ups.

‘Many young people finish school in the area, leave to go to university and college, [and] ideally they would then move back. But many don’t see it as an option because they aren’t able to work from home and there aren’t enough job opportunities locally to sustain the population.’

Audit Scotland focus group attendee, Argyll and Bute

22. People in rural areas may pay the same as their urban counterparts for a poorer internet service. As more activity moves online it can increase the isolation that many in rural communities face, including because of limited access to public services.

Online public services do not always consider the needs of people without digital access, which may put their rights at risk

23. Public bodies that have taken a ‘digital by default’ or ‘digital first’ approach to services have not always sufficiently considered the needs of people who are digitally excluded. People unable to access public services because of a lack of digital access are increasingly at risk of not being able to fully realise their human rights. This can include the right to education, a fair trial, protection from discrimination, social security, and to receive and impart information. Examples of the impact of digital exclusion that people told us about are set out in [Exhibit 2 \(page 13\)](#).

Exhibit 2.

How people experience digital exclusion and the rights affected










Examples from Audit Scotland focus groups and third sector evidence on how people are digitally excluded and the human rights that are potentially affected.



Examples of digital exclusion



Human rights affected

Accessibility	
The distances of rural homes from the telephone grid can mean that costly and sometimes unstable satellite internet is their only option.	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to receive and impart information
People with disabilities can find it difficult to use the online-only application process for disabled parking permits ('Blue Badges').	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection from discrimination
Pace of change	
<p>People find it difficult to apply for council tax reductions, as some councils have moved the application process online.</p> <p>Parents and carers can find it difficult to use digital apps now commonly required to support their child's education.</p>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to social security  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to receive and impart information  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to education
Skills and confidence	
People struggle to access their welfare benefits accounts because they find managing their passwords difficult.	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to social security
Different formats of devices can make it difficult for people to transfer the skills they have in using one device to another. People with lower literacy skills can also lack skills needed to use digital services.	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to receive and impart information  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection from discrimination
Fear, mistrust or lack of motivation	
Ethnic minority groups can have difficulties with language barriers when using online services, which creates a disconnect with public services, and affects trust.	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection from discrimination

Cont.



Examples of digital exclusion



Human rights affected

Affordability

People can find data costs unaffordable:

'When my **4G** ran out I didn't have internet. It's a lot of money to keep topping up my phone. I couldn't get unlimited data.'



- Protection from discrimination
- Right to receive and impart information

Connectivity

An individual's Universal Credit was sanctioned because of delays updating their online journal. This was due to not having access to a reliable mobile phone signal to update their records.



- Right to social security
- Right to receive and impart information

Online justice services can create challenges and barriers for people without digital connections, who lack skills or confidence or who have disabilities.



- Right to a fair trial
- Right to receive and impart information
- Protection from discrimination

Source: Audit Scotland focus groups and interviews by third sector organisations

24. Current commitments to realising human rights and further proposals to strengthen human rights legislation in Scotland will make it increasingly important for public bodies to consider them in the way that services are provided and accessed. This includes digital access.

25. The Scottish Government consulted on a new Human Rights Bill for Scotland in 2023. The introduction of the Bill has been delayed and at the time of publishing the timescales had still to be confirmed. When the Bill is introduced it will mean that public bodies will have to take human rights into account when making decisions about budgets and services and that people will be able to seek resolution if their rights are not being met.



4G is short for fourth-generation wireless, the stage of mobile phone communications that supersedes 3G (third-generation wireless), that allows high speed downloads and uploads.

2. How well is the public sector tackling digital exclusion?

While the public sector response to digital exclusion increased during the pandemic, momentum has now slowed. The Scottish Government has reduced spending on tackling digital exclusion and its ambitions are unclear but there are building blocks that can help drive progress.

The help available to get online varies and people often rely on informal support

26. People affected by digital exclusion often do not know where to go for support. Many are reliant on family, friends, and neighbours. Local community organisations and other third sector organisations provide important support but do not always have the resources for this. Public bodies often underestimate the level of digital support people need.

27. These types of support are valuable but not everyone has access to them. It can also mean people having to share sensitive and personal information, or not access services they need. Our audit focus groups found people:

- relying on family members to pay online rent and bills
- asking neighbours to submit meter readings to utility companies
- disclosing private health and financial information to their children who are helping them to access online services
- not claiming the benefits they are entitled to.



Programmes to reduce digital exclusion are in place, but access varies across the country

28. The Scottish Government, councils, the third sector, and parts of the private sector have all played a part in supporting digital inclusion. [Exhibit 3 \(page 16\)](#) provides an overview of the main programmes and funding in place.

Exhibit 3.

Programmes aimed at tackling digital exclusion

There are a range of national and local programmes across Scotland.

 Programme	Type of support	 Funding and delivery
National programmes		
Connecting Scotland	Provides devices, data and skills to targeted groups of people.	2020/21: £50m, 2023/24: £1.3m, 2024/25: £1.6m Funded by Scottish Government and delivered by SCVO in partnership with third sector.
Scotland's Digital Participation Charter	Promotes an ethical and inclusive digital approach. Organisations that have signed up are able to access a range of tools and support.	2014–21: £1.8m, 2023/24: £150,000 Sponsored by the Scottish Government (with Cellnex UK for round 9). Delivered by SCVO in partnership with third sector.
Local programmes		
Place-based approaches	Local collaborative strategies to respond to local needs and provide support.	Funded by local partnerships.
User-focused programmes		
Digital Lifelines	Supports the development of digitally inclusive services for people at risk of drug-related harm.	2021–23 and 2023–25: £3m across two phases Funded by the Scottish Government. Delivered by SCVO, Digital Health & Care Innovation Centre, Simon Community and Connecting Scotland.
Digital inclusion programme	Supports users of mental health and housing services to use online support services and build skills and confidence.	2023–25: £2m Funded by the Scottish Government. Funding managed by SCVO.

Source: Audit Scotland

29. The [Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations](#) (SCVO) has taken a lead role in working with the Scottish Government on digital inclusion programmes. This includes delivering the Connecting Scotland programme and Scotland's Digital Participation Charter. There are also new innovative, user-focused projects supporting some of the most digitally excluded people already facing disadvantage.

The Scottish Government and local government response to digital exclusion increased during the pandemic

30. The Scottish Government has a longstanding policy commitment to tackling digital exclusion ([Exhibit 4, page 18](#)). Before the pandemic, the Digital Participation Charter fund supported initiatives across the third sector. The introduction of Covid-19 lockdown measures in March 2020 and a rapid shift to online living, working, and learning increased the scale and impact of digital exclusion and led to a renewed policy response.

31. The nationwide Connecting Scotland programme was launched by the Scottish Government in May 2020. Its purpose was to provide digital devices, internet connectivity and skills support to vulnerable people whose welfare was most at risk because of pandemic restrictions. A joint digital strategy for Scotland, [A changing nation: how Scotland will thrive in a digital world](#) was published by the Scottish Government and COSLA in 2021. This set out a vision for a digital nation where 'no one (is) left behind' by digital progress.

Connecting Scotland quickly provided a lifeline for many vulnerable households during the pandemic

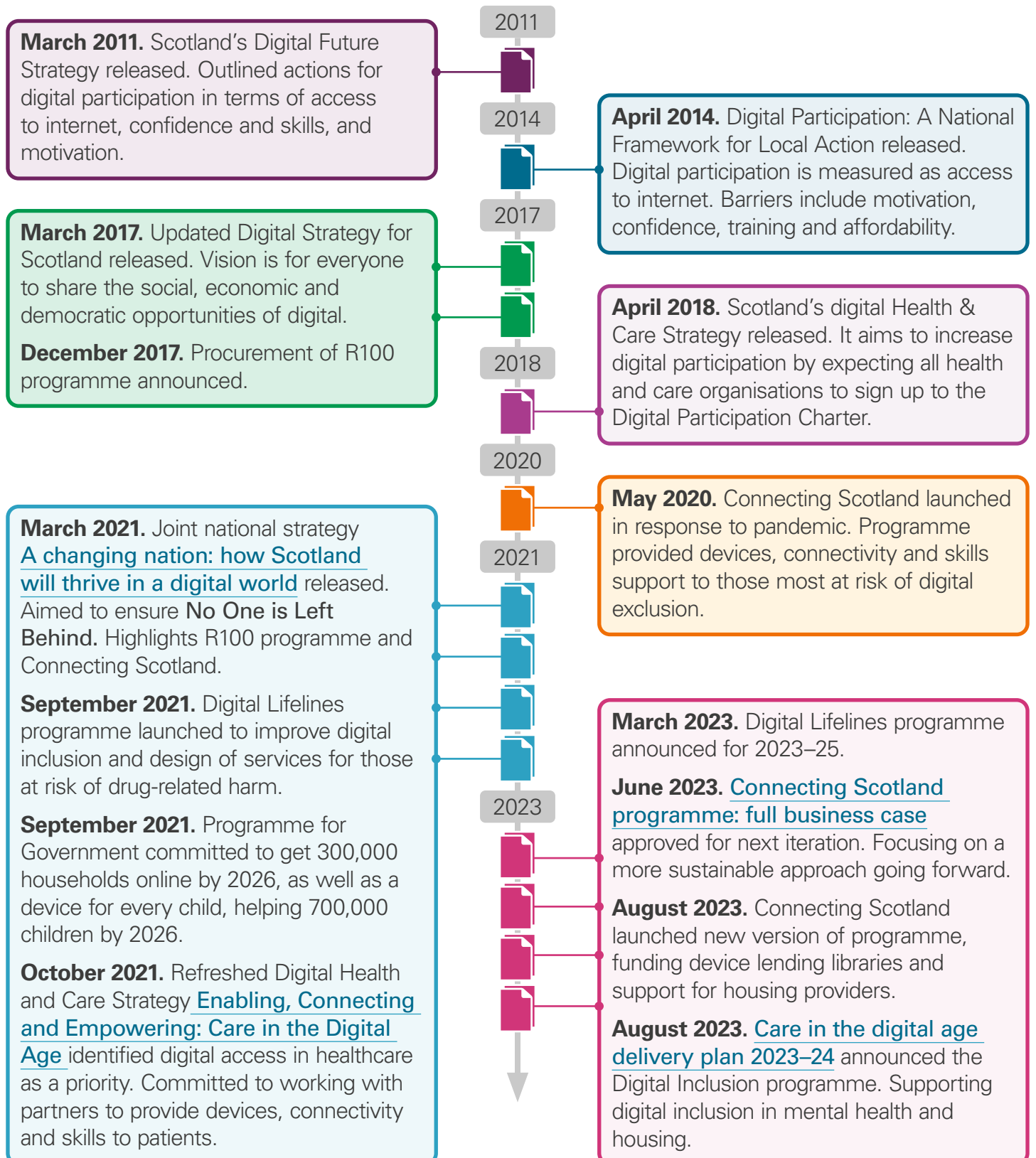
32. Connecting Scotland supported over 61,000 households to get online, with around £50 million in funding from May 2020 to December 2021. It targeted people at high risk of Covid-19, young care leavers, families with children, socially isolated older and disabled people, and low-income households. SCVO delivered the programme on behalf of the Scottish Government, supported by all 32 councils and over 1,000 organisations.

33. Evaluation of Connecting Scotland showed that it had a positive impact on people's lives, helping to combat isolation, support better mental health and improved digital skills. Users reported:

- increases in digital skills and confidence, mostly to help stay in contact with friends and family
- children being able to participate in remote learning and complete schoolwork online
- being able to search for and apply for jobs.

Exhibit 4.

Scottish Government digital exclusion strategic commitments and programmes



34. The programme was positively received by the public sector, third sector organisations, and service users. Key to success was close partnership working across the public and third sectors to support vulnerable people. This allowed the programme to deliver quickly and at scale.

35. Evaluation identified concerns over sustainability of the one-to-one delivery model and the level of investment required to provide free data packages and ongoing support by digital champions. A transition plan was needed to ensure people could afford a data package following the end of the programme. Evaluation has informed the business case for the current phase of the Connecting Scotland programme.

The joint digital strategy lacks a clear plan and accountability and is now to be refreshed amidst difficult public finances

36. The Scottish Government and COSLA joint strategy lacks a delivery plan that sets out the detailed actions that are needed, who is responsible for them, and timescales or monitoring arrangements. It is also not clear how COSLA is supporting the strategy ambitions as the Local Government **Digital Office**, the delivery body for the Local Government Digital Partnership, does not include tackling digital exclusion as part of its work programme. This makes it difficult to determine what progress they are making on tackling digital exclusion.

37. Governance arrangements to support and scrutinise progress of the digital strategy are outlined in [Exhibit 5 \(page 20\)](#). Meetings of key governance groups have been infrequent. The first progress report on the strategy was published in May 2024 following a delayed strategy review which was approved by the Joint Digital Strategy Leadership Board in December 2023.

38. Good governance and leadership are important to ensure effective delivery and drive change on the ground. Effective governance arrangements should include: clear roles and responsibilities, terms of reference and lines of accountability; a clear plan, timescales, and actions; and regular reporting on progress, costs and risks to the overall board, and timely decisions.

39. The Scottish Government's digital directorate has overall responsibility for the digital strategy. But the ambition 'to ensure everyone can access services' places a shared responsibility across all public bodies who are carrying out digital transformation. There is no overview of how well this is happening. The recently approved strategy review does not provide a picture of progress across the Scottish Government, what is working well and what spending is taking place. And current governance groups are not working effectively to scrutinise progress across the wider system.

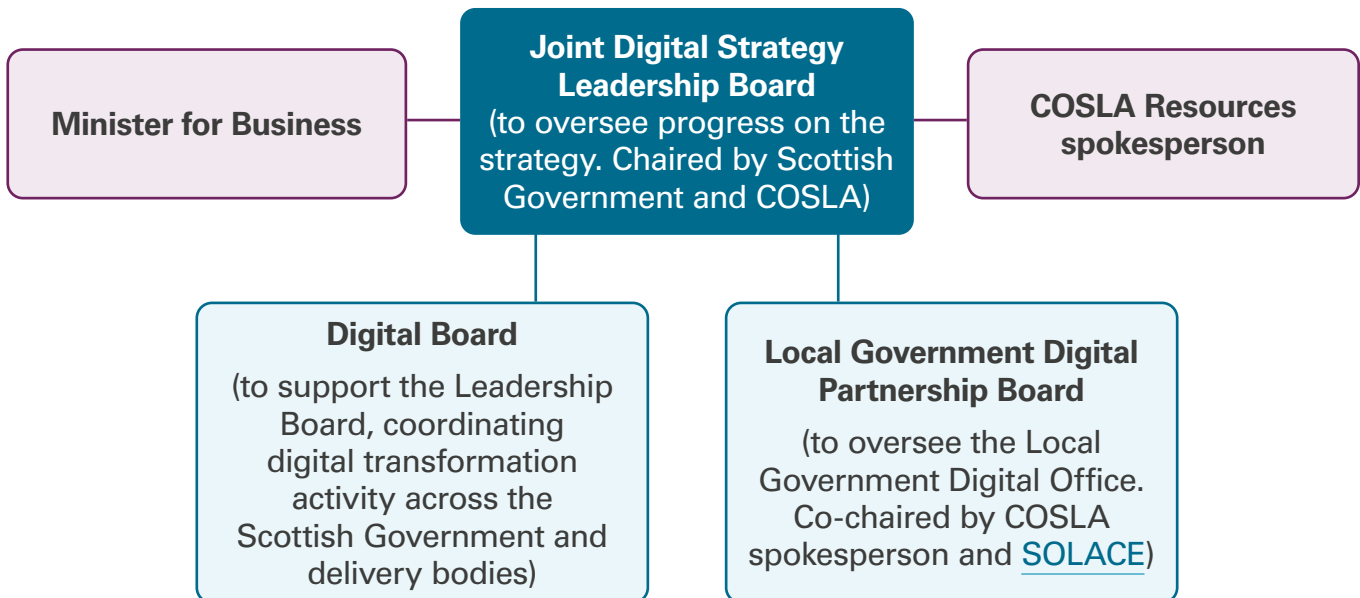


The **Digital Office** was founded in 2016 and supports Scottish local authorities with their digital transformation journeys. It provides leadership, guidance, resources, and expertise for navigating the complexities of the ever changing digital landscape.

Exhibit 5.

Governance arrangements for the national digital strategy

Current overall responsibilities to support and scrutinise progress of the digital strategy.



Source: Audit Scotland

40. The Joint Digital Strategy Leadership Board has agreed to refresh the digital strategy to take account of challenging public finances. It will also consider the implications of the June 2023 [Verity House Agreement](#) setting out how the Scottish Government and COSLA will work together. Digitalisation will have a role to play in these joint priorities. An effective and relevant national digital strategy that clearly sets the priorities for central and local government and partners will be critical.

The Scottish Government has not reset its policy ambitions following significant reductions in funding

41. The Scottish Government has significantly reduced its funding commitments to Connecting Scotland amid challenging public finances:

- The 2021 Programme for Government committed to investing £200 million to support 300,000 households to get online through Connecting Scotland in this parliamentary term (up to 2026).⁵
- In 2023, the Scottish Government approved the business case for the next phase of Connecting Scotland with the cost of the approved option ranging from £2.4 million to £9.8 million over a two-year period, depending on the number of people supported, (between 4,000 and 16,000), and whether a one-to-one or one-to-many model was adopted.

- The 2023/24 budget committed £1.3 million to the programme. This included funding of £86,700 to 19 organisations in autumn 2023 for device lending libraries, and £117,900 for social housing organisations in Scotland. These are anticipated to benefit 1,900 and 4,200 people respectively.
- The funding for Connecting Scotland for 2024/25 is £1,595,000.

42. It is unclear whether digital exclusion remains a priority for government given these funding reductions, particularly in the absence of a clear strategy and supporting activity. The Scottish Government has not yet set out any revised ambitions for tackling digital exclusion.

Scottish Government ambitions to build stronger connections across sectors are at an early stage while collaborative working has weakened

43. Existing initiatives such as the Digital Participation Charter, and a new Digital Inclusion Alliance are part of Scottish Government aims to build stronger connections across sectors to secure joint outcomes. There has been limited progress on these. A launch of the Digital Inclusion Alliance was planned for March 2024 but there is still no clear detail on membership, remit or workplan.

44. The Scottish Government created a new Digital Citizen Unit in 2022, which was intended to become the authoritative body for its digital exclusion work. This has been expanded into a Digital Citizen Division that is responsible for the Connecting Scotland programme and the Digital Inclusion Alliance, but progress has been slow since its formation. Connecting Scotland governance groups have met infrequently and there is a lack of clarity on the division's role in working with other departments and parts of the public sector.

45. Working together and across sectors is essential to tackle digital exclusion, and in the absence of significant investment, sharing and leveraging resources is more important to achieve outcomes. The partnership working that was key to the success of the initial Connecting Scotland programme will be essential if the Digital Inclusion Alliance is to help in the planning and coordination of digital exclusion strategy and action.

The Scottish Government is making progress on digital access in key service areas but tightening public finances mean there is a need for greater coordination across government

46. A programme aiming to support the ambitions of the Digital Health and Care Strategy is testing digital inclusion models that can be applied more widely across public services. This includes working to tackle

digital exclusion for people accessing mental health and housing services ([Exhibit 3, page 16](#)).

47. Social Security Scotland has put in place measures to minimise digital exclusion and runs an annual client experience survey collecting data on online services. Support for people without online access includes:

- All benefits can be applied for non-digitally, including by telephone, paper, and face to face. Forms are available in Easy Read, large print and Braille.
- Face-to-face guidance and advice on applying for benefits is available in each local authority area, often through services co-located with council services.
- Home visits are available on request.

48. In 2021, the Scottish Government made a commitment that every school-aged child in Scotland (around 700,000 pupils) would have access to a device and connectivity to support their learning by 2026. Remote learning during the pandemic had emphasised the importance of digital access for school pupils.

49. In December 2023, a ministerial decision was taken to have a more targeted approach considering the challenging public finances. Capital funding of £10 million has been committed for 2024/25 to target devices and connectivity for the most disadvantaged households with children. There are plans to deliver this through the Connecting Scotland programme.

50. Several local authorities have made provision for school pupils to have access to devices and connectivity at school, while others have provided limited support. Information provided to the Scottish Government by councils in December 2022 showed that 280,000 devices had been given to learners, which is 39 per cent of all school pupils.⁶

51. These examples from some parts of the Scottish Government offer scope for shared learning to inform the strategic approach to tackle digital exclusion in other service areas. They also demonstrate a need for greater coordination across government departments to get the best out of limited resources.

Council digital services are not always easy to access

52. Our [Digital progress in local government](#) report in 2021 highlighted that councils were moving services online but needed to ensure that no one is being left behind. It found limited examples of service users being involved in service design. We recommended that councils needed to address barriers and inequalities and put the needs of people at the heart of service design.

53. In this audit, we found that people are continuing to face difficulties in accessing some services where they have been digitalised. Often there is no easy way for people to access services in a non-digital way.

54. Increased digitalisation of customer services can provide opportunities for people to use self-service options for routine tasks. However poorly planned digital services can disadvantage vulnerable people. Some council services that citizens frequently find difficult to access include:

- the Blue Badge scheme that helps people with disabilities or health conditions park closer to their destination
- council housing adaptations
- cost of living support and guidance.

Councils are taking a place-based approach to tackling digital exclusion, but clearer national support is needed

55. We found examples of councils putting local strategies and measures in place to tackle digital exclusion:

- **Consulting residents to understand needs and inform support programmes** – Perth and Kinross Council consulted residents online and in person to understand digital engagement and barriers. In response, the council has funded digital skills training for residents and front-line council staff, provided technology for lower income households, and developed digital inclusion and accessibility factsheets.
- **Setting up device lending libraries** – Stirling Council runs a free digital tablet lending service, with free connectivity supported by Connecting Scotland, along with providing skills support.

56. For councils, taking a place-based approach to tackling digital exclusion is important. That means working with local people and organisations and taking account of the local needs, assets, and geography to plan activity ([Case study 3, page 32](#)).

57. While some councils are aligning their approach with the national digital strategy, all councils would benefit from further support and resources from the Scottish Government and COSLA. The Local Government Digital Office hosts a Local Government Service Design Group. The group has membership from 17 councils who share learning on digital service design and promote use of the Scottish Approach to Service Design. This forum is an opportunity to also share learning on how councils can consider digital inclusion when digitalising services.

3. Enabling digital inclusion

Enabling digital inclusion means supporting people and designing services so that people can use digital technology and services in a way that benefits them. There are key principles that public bodies can follow, building on the growing examples of good practice.

Principles for enabling digital inclusion

58. All public bodies have a responsibility to enable digital inclusion in their programmes for reform. Public service reform will only be effective if everyone is included and can access the services they need. This helps secure better outcomes for people and realise human rights in the digital age.

59. Our audit identified many of the practical steps that public bodies must take to address exclusion as they bring in digital technology to deliver services. Key to this is understanding the full range of people's needs, addressing these through the design of online services and putting in place support for people in places that they can access.

60. Audit Scotland has developed a set of principles for enabling digital inclusion, based on the evidence we have gathered for this report ([Exhibit 6, page 25](#)). The rest of Part 3 includes details of initiatives supporting the principles and examples of the principles in practice.

61. Putting these principles in place needs leadership, collaboration and an understanding of what resources are available. This means coordinating efforts across different public and third sector bodies. We have developed a checklist for public bodies, their boards and elected members to consider ([Supplement 1](#)).

Digital technology is an essential utility and helps enable human rights

62. In an increasingly digital world, digital inclusion helps people to realise their human rights. We outline key rights that digital exclusion affects in [Exhibit 2 \(page 13\)](#).

63. The Scottish Government has stated an ambition to introduce a **minimum digital living standard** of living for Scotland. This builds on work by the University of Liverpool that recognises digital technology as an essential utility and aims to set a benchmark for digital rights across the UK.



Minimum digital living standard

'A minimum digital standard of living includes, but is more than, having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills, knowledge and support people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence.'

[MDLS website](#)

64. The Scottish Government has not yet set out how it will achieve the Minimum Digital Living Standard, but a standard would help in setting clearer rights for citizens and inform an inclusive digital approach.

Exhibit 6.

Principles for enabling digital inclusion

A set of principles to support the public sector to design inclusive digital services.



Why enable digital inclusion?

- Helps people to realise their human rights.
- Secures better outcomes for vulnerable people most at risk of digital exclusion.
- Enables people to use digital technology and tools safely and securely.
- Allows people to access the services that they need in a straightforward way.
- Enables effective public sector reform (leaving no one behind).



How do we enable digital inclusion?

- Collaboration – working across sectors, with private and third sector, including place-based approaches.
- With clear and coordinated plans and strategies.
- Using person centred and tailored approaches.
- Making sure staff have the appropriate digital skills to support and build capacity amongst users.
- Supporting people at point of need.
- As part of service design and reform – involving people who use services and taking account of everyone's needs.



What needs to be put in place to enable digital inclusion?

- Robust equality impact assessment as part of any digital transformation programme or service redesign and effective person-centred design.
- Affordable access to devices and data.
- Accessible skills programmes for service users and providers.
- Digitally assisted services where they are needed to support access.
- Local, placed-based support where people feel comfortable and safe.
- Clear information and routes to support.

Enabling digital inclusion is vital for the wellbeing and social inclusion of vulnerable people most at risk of being excluded

65. Being digitally connected can reduce social isolation for people already facing disadvantage, allowing them to be connected to family and friends, the wider community, and services.

66. Examples of targeted support that enables digital inclusion are growing. Person-centred support can have a positive impact on people who are the most socially excluded. People with learning disabilities, older people and homeless people are all at greater risk of social isolation but can benefit when they are supported to use digital tools and technology.

67. The Digital Lifelines programme provides a person-centred model of digital inclusion for people at risk of drug-related harm. Delivered by a trusted support worker, it can help people become digitally included and build social and supportive connections ([Case study 1, page 27](#)).

Enabling digital inclusion is an essential part of public sector reform and makes it everyone's business

68. The Scottish Government considers digital transformation central to reforming public services.⁷ Reform will only achieve the efficiencies and outcomes needed through digitalisation if everyone is included.

69. We have outlined how poorly designed digital services without useable alternatives can lead to barriers to accessing services and have a negative impact on vulnerable people. There is a risk that part of the population is unseen or unheard if the pace of technological change continues, and the public sector only engages with citizens online without providing support for digital inclusion.

70. Digital inclusion is essential to realise the aims of reform. This means that all public bodies carrying out digital transformation need to enable digital inclusion – it should be everyone's business.

71. The Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2023–24 proposed a framework for digital service transformation. The Verity House Agreement also set an ambition to 'deliver sustainable person-centred public services'. Both provide opportunities to advance public sector reform and embed digital inclusion within digital service transformation.^{8, 9}

Case study 1. Digital Lifelines

Launched in 2021, Digital Lifelines aims to improve digital exclusion and health outcomes for people at risk of drug-related harm.

Since 2021, the programme has received £3.1 million from the Scottish Government through the Digital Health and Care, Drugs Policy Division and the Drugs Death Taskforce. It has delivered the following activities:

- provided devices, connectivity, and skills and confidence training to people at risk of drug-related harm and death and people who support them
- developed new digital services for the benefit of users
- increased the understanding of the digital needs of people at risk of drug-related death
- set up a community of learning.

As at March 2023, the programme had funded 27 organisations, trained 55 digital champions across Scotland and supported 930 people at risk of drug-related death or harm. Programme recipients report positive impacts such as:

- enabling connections with families and friends, peers and supporters
- supporting health and wellbeing
- enabling access to services and information
- building trust, confidence and security
- enabling access to life opportunities, for example finances, jobs and volunteering opportunities, and housing.

The programme aims to improve workforce digital awareness, skills and confidence. This supports staff to deliver the programme and understand the potential impact of digital inclusion on people and the barriers that they face.

Source: Audit Scotland, [Digital Lifelines Scotland](#)



People working in the public and third sectors understand what needs to be put in place to enable digital inclusion

72. Leadership, collaborative working, and resources are needed to enable digital inclusion. SCVO's [digital roadmap for Scotland](#) draws on wider research and learning as well as feedback from its [#connect 23](#) events with stakeholders from across the third sector and public sector.

73. The roadmap aligns with the digital exclusion issues set out in this report and can help inform actions that the Scottish Government, councils and the wider public sector should consider to make meaningful progress. It sets out and builds on the [five pillars](#), published jointly by SCVO and the Scottish Government in 2023, that support digital inclusion, together with actions:

- **Motivation** – to be part of the digital world, free from personal barriers
- **Access to the right device** – the ability to afford an internet-enabled device that is suitable for your needs and the task in hand
- **Affordable connectivity** – so that you can connect your device to the internet
- **Skills and confidence** – to navigate the internet, keeping yourself safe, doing the things you want to do
- **Inclusive design** – when you get online, spaces are well designed so that everyone can use them.

74. The roadmap also outlines three enablers:

- **Policy** – with commitments across the public, private and third sectors
- **Partnership** – coordination of efforts across sectors and partners
- **Resources** – the need for commitment to public spending, in-kind support and contributions from the private sector.

Digital options can improve access to services, but they need to be easy to use and include assisted digital options

75. People need to have straightforward access to the services they need and are entitled to. Given the prevalence of digital exclusion and the impact it can have, it is important that there are non-digital or assisted digital ways of getting the services people need.

76. Work is ongoing that recognises the benefits that digital services can bring to people but also recognises that for some people they are not always appropriate or easy to use. The ALLIANCE, Scottish Care and VOX (Voices of Experience) Scotland have developed [principles for a human rights-based approach to digital health and social care](#) across Scotland, and identified practice-based examples of how the principles can be applied. For those working in social care there is a SSSC Open Badge.

77. The Near Me video consulting service grew rapidly during the Covid-19 pandemic. The service has made recent improvements to its access including options to use Near Me in local libraries and community centres, particularly in rural areas. This has provided safe, confidential spaces for access, reliable connectivity, and onsite support from staff. Involving people using the service in the design process provided insight into how the service could be more accessible ([Case study 2](#)).

Case study 2.

Near Me

Near Me is a video consulting service that enables people to attend healthcare and other appointments via video call. The pandemic accelerated the uptake of Near Me which is now used by every NHS board and provides around 33,000 online consultations each month.



In 2020, workshops involving people with different protected characteristics informed an equality impact assessment (EQIA) of Near Me. The assessment identified several barriers to accessing Near Me, including:

- having a safe and appropriate space to host a call
- having access to a suitable device
- having suitable connectivity
- being skilled and confident enough to use the service.

The service was extended into local community hubs and libraries providing accessibility for people who may not have online access due to cost-of-living pressures or lack a private space at home. A directory of 60 hubs was developed which allows people to identify their local hubs when they need them.

Patients continue to have the choice between video and in-person appointments while capacity is being built to offer Near Me across the NHS and ensure that the appropriate type of consultation is used.

Source: Audit Scotland

78. Public services can put in place strategies and support for people who cannot use digital services on their own. These approaches can be built into digital transformation programmes and are sometimes described as digitally assisted services. They can include non-digital access, face-to-face support, training and improving accessibility of all digital elements.

79. For example, Argyll and Bute Council outlines a range of assisted digital services it offers including:

- customer service points in nine locations where staff can support customers in accessing council related services
- a 24/7 voice automated phone service for those who prefer not to go online
- a natural language chatbot to support people in using the council website.

Service design tools already available are not applied as widely and consistently as they could be

80. Tools such as the Scottish Approach to Service Design (SATSD), Digital Scotland Service Standard (DSSS) and Equalities Impact Assessments (EQIAs) can help public bodies to consider digital exclusion as part of their service design and delivery and help identify support for people.

81. The Scottish Government's 2021 Digital Scotland Service Standard sets out criteria for delivering inclusive and accessible services:

'People have a legal right to services and payments from public sector organisations. This means government has a duty to consider everyone's needs when designing and delivering services.' This includes disabled people and people who do not have access to the internet or lack the skills or confidence to use it.

Digital Scotland Service Standard, Scottish Government, 2021

82. The use of service design tools and meaningfully involving users is still developing across the public sector. Design tools are not always easy to use, and help is needed for wider adoption. Where they are used, sometimes organisations do not progress to service delivery as quickly as is needed.

83. The Scottish Government's digital health and care division has set up an Equalities and Inclusion Group with cross-sector representatives from public, third, and independent care sectors; advocacy groups; and

households with lived experience. This allows it to use inclusive methods and access expert advice on equalities and inclusion in digital health and care services, such as Near Me.

More could be done to promote affordable internet access

84. Social tariffs are cheaper broadband and phone packages available for households claiming certain benefits such as Universal Credit, which is expected to be claimed and managed online in most cases. However, of the 4.6 million people in the UK on Universal Credit, only eight per cent (380,000) of eligible household have signed up for social tariffs.¹⁰

85. The low uptake of social tariffs has been attributed to:

- lack of awareness among eligible households
- tariffs still being too expensive for eligible households
- some eligible households having a poor credit rating and not being able to access a broadband contract and the social tariff that goes with it.

86. The Scottish Government's focus on increasing broadband and mobile connectivity across Scotland will make an important contribution, particularly for those in rural areas. But this alone will not help people on lower incomes and benefits who cannot afford to access the internet.

Collaboration across sectors and in local areas is needed to effectively address digital exclusion

87. Place-based approaches can help enable digital inclusion. This means focusing on the local issues, assets, relationships, and local solutions. It can involve councils, other public bodies, third sector organisations and local people working together to make plans, identify gaps in support and develop clear routes to support for people affected by digital exclusion. For example, Perth and Kinross Council has created a 'Getting online directory' for local people needing help to get online and use technology.

88. Renfrewshire Council has also taken a place-based approach. It has involved local people and organisations to develop a strategy and coordinate activity that tackles digital exclusion ([Case study 3, page 32](#)).



Social tariffs are cheaper broadband and phone packages delivered by service providers in the same way as standard packages. Some providers call them 'essential' or 'basic' packages.

Case study 3.

DigiRen

Renfrewshire council collaborating to deliver a place-based approach to digital inclusion

Renfrewshire Council has a digital strategy which recognises connectivity as a need and aims to provide people with the skills and support to access digital technology.

To date, it has secured over £40 million in private investment, providing full fibre coverage to 80 per cent of households by autumn 2023, compared with 52 per cent nationally. It is developing an outline business case for 'smart social housing' to provide free internet connectivity to around 11,000 council houses, supporting access to council services and helping tackle poverty and inequality.

During the pandemic the council worked with the Connecting Scotland programme and local partners to allocate devices and connectivity to around 2600 households.

The DigiRen network was created to drive the council's digital participation work and allows members to share information and best practice on digital inclusion. It has over 150 individuals from 40 organisations covering the public, third, private, social housing and academic sectors.

It has also set up a 'Citizen Voice' forum to co-design digital inclusion solutions. The forum has 23 members across the public and third sector representing the needs of citizens, to identify local barriers to digital participation. In 2023, the forum recruited a digital champions lead which to date has recruited ten champions supporting over 180 learners.

It is in the process of co-creating 'Digizones' that aim to provide digital inclusion supports. These include access to devices, internet access, digital skills and digital champions across different settings, including public places, eg libraries.

The council is in the process of developing a digital roadmap which aims to embed these digital activities across council strategies and plans. It focuses on the 'digital citizen' and was recently presented to the council's digital board.

Source: Audit Scotland



Endnotes

- 1 [Essential Digital Skills data tables](#), Lloyds Bank, November 2023.
- 2 [Data Poverty in Scotland and Wales](#), Nesta, April 2021.
- 3 [Scottish Household Survey 2022: Key Findings](#), Scottish Government, December 2023.
- 4 [Connected Nations Scotland Report 2023](#), Ofcom, December 2023.
- 5 [A fairer, greener Scotland: programme for government 2021–22](#), p79, Scottish Government, September 2021.
- 6 [Digital devices in schools: FOI release](#), Scottish Government, January 2024.
- 7 [Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2024–25: The Sustainability of Scotland’s Finances](#), Finance and Public Administration Committee, Scottish Parliament, November 2023.
- 8 [Equality, Opportunity, Community: Our Programme for Government](#), Scottish Government, September 2023.
- 9 [Verity House Agreement](#), COSLA and Scottish Government, June 2023.
- 10 [Pricing trends for communications services in the UK](#), Ofcom, December 2023.

Appendix

Audit methodology: lived experience work and human rights-based approach

This audit used the [PANEL principles](#) to take a human rights-based approach (HRBA). PANEL principles include:

- **Participation:** Involve groups and individuals with lived experience of digital exclusion throughout the audit.
- **Accountability:** Ensure that the scope of the audit and fieldwork considers how people's rights are affected by digital exclusion and use these findings to inform interviews with public bodies.
- **Non-discrimination:** Ensure that people most affected by digital exclusion can participate in the fieldwork.
- **Empowerment:** Ensure people participating in the audit are supported to do so at all stages, are provided with information on the audit and the role of Audit Scotland, and are supported to know and understand what their rights are.
- **Legality:** Ensure that the scope and focus of the fieldwork adequately takes account of legal rights and frameworks.

We aimed to capture people's lived experience of digital exclusion. We carried out in-depth fieldwork in two council areas: Argyll and Bute, and Renfrewshire. This involved holding a series of focus groups of people with experience of accessing digital services and some of the difficulties that presents.

This work was supported by the Corra Foundation, which organised and facilitated the focus groups and provided summary reports of the focus group findings. These findings were used to shape interview schedules with public sector and third sector organisations, and to provide insight into digital exclusion in the audit report.

To ensure that PANEL principles were used throughout the audit process, focus group participants were invited to form a reference group. The purpose of this group is to ensure people with lived experience are involved beyond the evidence gathering stage of the audit. The group has provided insight and feedback during the reporting phase and helped to improve the accessibility of the findings.

The findings in this report are also based on evidence from the following sources:

- Discussions with third sector organisations that work with people at risk of digital exclusion, including the Health and Social Care Alliance (the ALLIANCE), the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO), Citizens Advice Scotland, Simon Community Scotland, the Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities, the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) and Age Scotland.
- Interviews with public sector staff from the Scottish Government, Education Scotland, Social Security Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the Local Government Digital Partnership and Local Government Digital Office (LGDO), Improvement Service, and councils including Renfrewshire Council, and Argyll and Bute Council.
- Analysis of data and research on digital exclusion produced by the Office of Communications (Ofcom), Scottish Household Survey and Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index.
- Review of documents provided by the Scottish Government, local government, other public sector and third sector organisations, and research on digital exclusion.

Tackling digital exclusion



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