

News release

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Clearer leadership and focus needed to tackle digital exclusion

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. But some people are being left behind as more services move online and reliance on digital technology increases, causing unintended harms and further widening inequalities.

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 don't have digital skills and those living in the nine per cent of homes without internet access.

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 2024/25 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's currently unclear across local and Scottish Government, and the third sector, who is responsible for delivering Scotland's national digital strategy.

Stephen Boyle, Auditor General for Scotland said:

“Digital technology is at the heart of public service reform. Increasing efficiency is vital to ensure services can be delivered cost-efficiently, at a time of ever-intensifying budget and service pressures.

“To achieve this, the Scottish Government must have clear actions to tackle and mitigate the impacts of digital exclusion. Failing to do so risks marginalising the most vulnerable people in our communities. Those who most depend on public services, must be at the forefront of the Government's plans to reform how services are delivered.”

Nichola Brown, Member of the Accounts Commission said:

“Councils across Scotland, working collaboratively with local public, private and third sector partners. must be clearer about how they will reduce digital exclusion in their local area.

“COSLA has a vital role in setting out clear commitments and actions to support councils to deliver on digital.”

Notes to Editor:

1. We reported on digital transformation within the public sector in [Enabling digital government](#) in 2019 and [Digital progress in local government in 2021](#). [Find out more on our website](#).

2. 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. An estimated 14 per cent are also unable to afford sufficient, private, and secure access to the internet. Nine per cent of households, according to the latest Scottish Household Survey, do not have access to the internet

3. 69% of Scottish households with an annual income below £10,000 have internet access, compared with 99% of households with an income over £40,000.

4. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

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