

Audit scope

Digital exclusion

How well are public bodies tackling digital exclusion?

ACCOUNTS COMMISSION 

AUDITOR GENERAL 

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Background

Digital technology has become increasingly important in our lives. We rely on it for working and learning, accessing public services, shopping, entertainment and connecting with others.

But as digital technology's importance to our daily lives has increased, so has the risk that people who don't use it are losing out. Those who don't have access to it, don't have the skills and confidence to use it, or choose not to use it, will be excluded from the advantages many take for granted.

The Covid-19 pandemic deepened the risks of digital exclusion, with public services shifting online. Public sector reform and a drive towards efficiency is also accelerating digital service roll out. Now the cost of living crisis is having an impact, with people struggling to afford the cost of devices, such as smart phones and tablets, and internet connections.

The public sector response to the pandemic included the 2020 launch of [Connecting Scotland](#). This was a Scottish Government programme which provided vulnerable and digitally excluded households with an internet connection, training and support, and a device. The Scottish Government and COSLA published a new [Digital Strategy](#) in March 2021. This set out a commitment to accessibility and inclusiveness, and included

a key principle, '**No One Left Behind**'. That principle recognises the importance of having an internet connection, and that '*unless we tackle digital exclusion we could increase rather than reduce inequalities in our society*'.

The Scottish Government has since made commitments in its 2021 Programme for Government to provide £200m to support 300,000 households to get online. Other commitments have been made to provide a digital device for every school aged child – an estimated 700,000 school pupils by 2026. This will involve working with councils.

The Scottish Government commissioned an independent evaluation of the Connecting Scotland programme in 2022 and plans to confirm details of the next steps in the programme in early 2023.

This audit will aim to answer some key questions:

- How well do public bodies understand digital exclusion and how it affects people?
- What impact does digital exclusion have on people in Scotland, and how does it affect their access to services and human rights?
- How effectively is the public sector tackling digital exclusion, taking

account of equalities and human rights?

In considering the experiences of individuals and communities, we will include those in rural and island communities where connectivity is an important issue. The audit will not include detailed consideration of the performance of the R100 programme or other broadband connectivity programmes. This is an area Audit Scotland has reported on previously (see our [Digital e-hub](#)).

Why is this audit important?

Research on digital exclusion shows that it is strongly associated with poverty and other forms of inequality and disadvantage. Older people, women, young care leavers, people who are disabled, those experiencing poverty and minority ethnic communities are more likely to be at risk of digital exclusion.

Poverty is a key driver with cost the main barrier to people getting online. But while there is some data on internet access and use, there is a lack of a complete picture of who is affected and how.

How will we carry out this audit?

We will carry out fieldwork in a small sample of communities and local authority areas and engage with individuals and groups. We will explore their experiences of digital exclusion, seeking to understand how it impacts them, and what they see as the key issues and solutions to digital exclusion. We will use the issues raised to inform the areas we will consider across public bodies.

We will also review documents, analyse data, and interview key individuals from the Scottish Government, COSLA and other key organisations using a case study approach. We will look at how effectively public bodies are considering digital exclusion in policy and service delivery, how their work addresses equalities, and how it relates to human rights.

What do we want to happen as a result?

We want this audit to provide information that will support a better understanding of digital exclusion, who is affected by it and what it means to people in realising their human rights. It will assess how well public bodies are tackling digital exclusion, including seeking assurance on how much is being invested in digital exclusion on the major programmes. It will support improvement through making recommendations and identifying innovative and effective practice in tackling digital exclusion.

Timetable

We plan to carry out our fieldwork during 2023 and publish our findings in early 2024.

Contact

If you have any questions or would like more information about this audit, please contact Bernadette Milligan, Audit Manager on 0131 625 1850 or by email at bmilligan@audit-scotland.gov.uk

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Audit Scotland, 4th Floor,
102 West Port, Edinburgh EH3 9DN
T: 0131 625 1500
E: info@audit-scotland.gov.uk
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk