



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Public Audit Committee

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Convener
Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

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Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

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Social Justice and Social Security Committee

4 February 2025

Dear Conveners

Tackling digital exclusion

At its [meeting on 5 September 2024](#), the Public Audit Committee (the Committee) heard evidence from the Auditor General for Scotland (AGS) on the joint Accounts Commission report, [Tackling digital exclusion](#). The Committee took further evidence from the Scottish Government at its [meeting on 31 October 2024](#)

The Committee considered [correspondence from the Scottish Government](#) and [from Citizens Advice Scotland](#) relating to its scrutiny of the report, at its meeting on 16 January 2025 and agreed to write to your committees to highlight key issues arising from its scrutiny that may be of relevance to your future work, and in doing so close its own scrutiny of the report.

Digital exclusion resulting from digital transformation

The report sets out that in March 2021, the Scottish Government and COSLA published a joint digital strategy for Scotland¹ which set out a “vision for a digital nation where ‘no one (is) left behind’ by digital progress”.

During evidence we heard from the AGS that digital transformation is an “essential part of public service reform”. The report states that moving services online can be

¹ [A changing nation: how Scotland will thrive in a digital world](#)

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cost effective for organisations and can benefit people who have the means and the skills to access and use digital technology.

The Committee was concerned to note that the report goes on to state—

“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.”

One of the key messages in the report is that “the most vulnerable groups of society are often most affected, including people in poverty, older people and disabled people. The report is clear on the importance of people being able to access digital services, it states that “a lack of digital access can have a negative impact on people’s lives”. The report goes on to say that digital exclusion can affect people’s access to services, social connections, health, and economic and financial wellbeing. Some of the consequences of digital exclusion set out in the report are—

- 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, and
- increasing social isolation.

The Committee echoes the view expressed in the report that the needs of people who use digital services should be at the heart of public service reform and service design.

Leadership

The report explains that the public sector response to digital exclusion increased significantly during the pandemic. The report then went on to add that “national leadership for tackling this critical issue has weakened since then and momentum has now slowed”. During evidence, the Committee heard from the AGS that—

“...with the ever greater adoption of digital technologies, not everybody will be able to move at the same pace, and there is a risk that, contrary to the stated ambition of no one being left behind, even more people could be left behind.”

The Committee explored this issue during evidence and heard from the Scottish Government that—

“We are now trying to work out the most important ways in which we can tackle digital exclusion in a sustainable way that makes improvements for the long term. There has not been any lack of focus or leadership on that, but we are in that rebuilding and refocusing phase”.

The report recommends that the Scottish Government and COSLA should, by the end of 2024/25 “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”. During evidence, the Scottish Government confirmed to the Committee that it accepted this recommendation.

The Committee supports the recommendation in the report that the Scottish Government and COSLA should produce a refreshed digital strategy, with a clear action plan for reducing digital exclusion, by the end of 2024/25.

Human rights

The report states that—

“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.”

Exhibit 2 of the report provides examples of how people are digitally excluded and the human rights that are potentially affected. During evidence, the AGS told the Committee that—

“Some of the evidence before us, about the ways in which public services are changing and whether members of the public either have or do not have access to them, shows that there is an increasing risk around human rights”.

In its written submission to the Committee, Citizens Advice Scotland stated—

“Digital exclusion is a human rights issue as it intersects with and can exacerbate social exclusion, poverty, health disparities, geographical and other inequalities.

The Committee draws your attention to the risk posed to people’s human rights by an inability to access public services due to digital exclusion.

Council services

The report acknowledges that significant pressures on public finances mean that both the Scottish Government and councils are required to make difficult choices about public spending priorities, including reducing the direct investment in tackling digital exclusion. In relation to council’s digital services, the report described them as “not always easy to access”.

The report goes on to state that “poorly planned digital services can disadvantage vulnerable people” and lists some of the council services that people frequently find difficult to access, this includes—

- 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.

The report contains examples of where some councils are putting into place local strategies and measures to tackle digital exclusion. The report also emphasised the importance of councils taking a “place-based” approach to tackling digital exclusion, that involves “working with local people and organisations and taking account of the local needs, assets, and geography to plan activity”.

The report goes on to add that, 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 Committee draws your attention to the important role that COSLA and councils play in ensuring that their online services are planned and designed to be accessible to everyone who may need to access the service.

Sharing good practice

The Committee agrees with the view expressed in the report that—

“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.”

The report provides examples of work undertaken by Social Security Scotland and through the Scottish Government’s Digital Health and Care Strategy. However, during evidence we heard from Audit Scotland that learning and good practice is not “getting joined up across the Scottish Government”. We also heard from Audit Scotland that—

“Where we are seeing examples of good practice, services are involving people from the beginning, thinking about what it means, consulting their communities to find out what the barriers are and trying to address those”.

The Committee supports the recommendation in the report that by the end of 2024/25, the Scottish Government and COSLA should set up a community of learning on increasing digital inclusion to coordinate activity across sectors and share resources, tools and good practice.

I hope these findings are helpful in informing your future work.

Yours sincerely,



Richard Leonard MSP

Convener