



OFFICIAL REPORT
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DRAFT

Public Audit Committee

Thursday 5 September 2024

Session 6



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PUBLIC AUDIT COMMITTEE

21st Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Stephen Boyle (Auditor General for Scotland)

Jillian Matthew (Audit Scotland)

Bernie Milligan (Audit Scotland)

Mike Neilson (Accounts Commission)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lynn Russell

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Public Audit Committee

Thursday 5 September 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Richard Leonard): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the 21st meeting in 2024 of the Public Audit Committee, which is our first after the Parliament's summer recess. Fulton MacGregor is joining us remotely.

First, are members content to take agenda items 4, 5 and 6 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you very much. Before we move to the major part of our agenda this morning, do members agree to take next week's meeting in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Tackling Digital Exclusion

09:01

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is a discussion on the "Tackling digital exclusion" report, which was produced just a few weeks ago. I am pleased that Stephen Boyle, who is the Auditor General for Scotland, is joining us this morning. Alongside the Auditor General are Jillian Matthew, who is a senior manager, and Bernie Milligan, who is an audit manager, both from Audit Scotland. We are also pleased to welcome Mike Neilson, who is a member of the Accounts Commission, because this is a joint report between Audit Scotland and the Accounts Commission.

As usual, we have a number of questions that we would like to put to you, but before we get to those, I invite the Auditor General to make a short opening statement.

Stephen Boyle (Auditor General for Scotland): Good morning. As you mentioned, convener, the report on tackling digital exclusion that we will discuss today is a joint report that Audit Scotland has prepared on behalf of me and the Accounts Commission.

Digital services bring many benefits, and public bodies need to use digital technology to improve their services as it offers opportunities for efficiencies and improved accessibility. Digital transformation is, of course, an essential part of public service reform. However, public bodies must recognise the needs of those people who do not have digital skills or access to digital services or an internet connection in their homes. One in every six adults in Scotland lacks essential digital skills, and 9 per cent of Scotland's households do not have an internet connection. Our audit adopted a human rights-based approach and considered people's rights and how they are affected by digital exclusion. During our audit, we spoke to people who have lived experience to provide insight and inform our audit work.

We also focused on recent developments to address digital exclusion across the public sector. We considered initiatives that have been put in place since the pandemic and assessed how the public sector is addressing digital exclusion. Digital exclusion can have a severe impact on people's lives, limiting access to services and affecting social, economic and financial wellbeing. We also found that people who already face other disadvantages are more likely to experience digital exclusion.

The public sector's response to digital exclusion, which was a focus in the early years of this decade during the pandemic, increased significantly. As the world moved online at that

point, the Scottish Government worked with councils, other public bodies and particularly the third sector to support more than 60,000 households to access devices, data and skills. At that time, it delivered at scale and pace to provide an emergency response. However, we have found that, since then, leadership to address digital exclusion has weakened and the momentum towards digital inclusion has slowed. The ambition of the national digital strategy is that

“no one is left behind”,

but the strategy lacks both a clear action plan and clear lines of responsibility.

We recognise that the current context of difficult public finances in which the Scottish Government and the wider public sector are operating presents a challenge in deciding on public spending priorities. The Government needs to be clear on its policy ambitions for digital inclusion and on how it will deliver on those ambitions in that challenging context.

All public bodies have a responsibility to enable digital inclusion. They must put people at the heart of change and reform, supporting them to use digital tools in a way that benefits them and ensuring that they can access the vital public services that they need. Our audit found some good examples of public bodies working to enable digital inclusion and our report includes some case studies. We also set out some important principles that public bodies should consider as they further adopt digital technologies, which are that they should have clear plans that focus on people's needs and that there should be improved co-ordination across the public and third sectors.

I am joined by Jillian Matthew and Bernie Milligan, who are the authors of the report, and I am pleased that Mike Neilson from the Accounts Commission is also with us. They represent the joint interest in the report and cover the wide breadth of public services in Scotland. We look forward to answering members' questions.

The Convener: I will begin on a positive note. You regularly come before the committee calling for public sector reform. One strand that many people identify with is the introduction of digital technology. The report is about how that is implemented and who is included in or excluded from that. Will you elaborate on why you think that digital technology is central to that public sector reform agenda? In your opening remarks, you mentioned some examples that are given in the report. Social Security Scotland is mentioned in particular. Can you say more about the examples that you have identified as good practice?

Stephen Boyle: I am happy to do so and will bring in colleagues to broaden out some of the examples.

Committee members will be familiar with the national health service's Near Me, which we have spoken about a number of times in different reports. That is a recent development in the use of digital platforms that can have a positive impact. It is an example of broadening access to services.

Our audit found that people's digital access to services is affected by their digital skills and by whether they have access to devices and connections in their homes. There is also a geographical component to that. People living in more rural parts of Scotland are less likely to have superfast broadband and they have longer distances to travel.

I will bring Bernie Milligan in to say more, but, although it can appear at times as if we need uniformity of services, we found NHS Near Me to be an example of innovation. We know that public services will have to innovate to keep pace with people's expectations. We all use and carry devices, and sometimes many of them. That is how we live our lives, and public services will have to move with that. There is an issue of accessibility, but also an element of economy, because the adoption of digital technology offers a path to efficiency.

I will mention one caveat before I hand over to Bernie to say more. We are on the cusp of potentially quite significant public service reform, and there is an increased risk that the pace of that reform and of the adoption of yet more digital technology will leave people behind. That is the opposite of the Government's stated ambition for no one to be left behind. One of the key recommendations in our report is therefore that service users should remain at the heart of transformation, and particularly digital transformation. We must equip people, either with skills or with devices, and we must offer a range of ways for people to access services.

Bernie Milligan might want to say more about NHS Near Me. We can also speak further about social security.

Bernie Milligan (Audit Scotland): I can say a wee bit more about NHS Near Me, which is a video consulting service that enables people to attend healthcare and other appointments remotely. We have included a case study about that in our report. Since the pandemic, we have seen massive acceleration in the use of Near Me by clinicians and patients. There was a recognition in the digital health and care team that some things could be done to ensure wider access to that facility. We have seen good use of equality impact assessments in the digital health and care directorate to look at what could be done to widen that access.

There has been some innovation in putting Near Me into community hubs and libraries, as a result of the recognition that not everyone has a safe and appropriate space in their home, has a secure connection or is skilled and confident enough to use something such as Near Me. It is about working collaboratively with library services and other community facilities. For example, Argyll and Bute provides a space in a village hall where people can use Near Me. That saves people from remote rural and island communities from travelling to mainland hospitals and so forth, and it also saves the costs associated with that.

The Convener: The Scottish Government's strategy document says:

"We will ... ensure that all public services are designed through the lenses of inclusion, offering signposted alternative ways of accessing services for those who cannot or do not want to use digital routes".

To what extent is that happening? You have mentioned the example of Near Me but, across the whole of the public sector and the provision of public services, how often are those services

"designed through the lenses of inclusion"?

Stephen Boyle: I mentioned in my opening remarks that we adopted a human rights-based approach to the audit. I will hand over to Jillian Matthew, who led a lot of the interaction that we had. We sought the views of people who were accessing public services across the piece, and Jillian might want to say a bit more about the local authority aspect of that. Their experience was that they did not have consistent access to services in a way that addressed their purposes. Through the audit, people told us that they struggled to find a consistent, straightforward and accessible way of accessing the range of public services.

Before I hand over to Jillian for her to elaborate as she wishes, I note that one of the key findings in the report is that, although the ambition in the strategy from the Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is clear and the strategy is consistent about tackling digital exclusion, there is a lack of clarity about which specific actions and what specific accountability would deliver on the strategy. Jillian can say more about our findings about people's experiences and the work of public services.

Jillian Matthew (Audit Scotland): As the Auditor General says, although there is that commitment, we are seeing a lot of variation. Within the Scottish Government, that work is much further forward in Social Security Scotland, which the convener mentioned, and in the digital health and care directorate, but it is still happening separately. Their learning and good practice is not getting joined up across the Scottish Government.

With regard to the work that we did in the council areas, Renfrewshire was one of the areas where we did the lived experience work and spoke to people. Part of taking a human rights-based approach was that we spoke to people first to find out what the issues are. We had an idea of what some of the challenges and barriers are, but we wanted to hear from them at first hand about what they are facing in their communities. We then used that information to feed into our audit and asked questions of the council and the Scottish Government.

Sorry—I was going to say something else about the lived experience work, but it has gone. It might come back to me.

The Convener: That is okay. I will bring Graham Simpson in to ask a quick question in a minute, but it is striking that, in the introduction to the report, in paragraph 6, you say:

"Digital exclusion is strongly associated with poverty and people with certain protected characteristics."

You go on to say, in paragraph 13, that digital exclusion is caused by affordability, by whether people have digital skills, by whether they "fear or mistrust" digital systems and by poor connectivity or being unable to afford to keep up with technological change.

09:15

In paragraph 16, you reiterate that the major causes of digital exclusion are poverty—including being on benefits—and age, because older people are presumably less likely to be able to access digital technology. You say that people with disabilities and those who are socially isolated must overcome barriers to access. That gives a clear sense of those people among our citizens who are predominantly excluded from public services that are digitally provided.

Stephen Boyle: That is absolutely right. I mentioned some statistics in my introductory remarks, and I highlight exhibit 1, which draws on some Ofcom survey data from 2022 on people who do not use the internet. You mentioned older people and those from more socially deprived groups, including people who live alone, those who are on benefits and those with disabilities. We sought to broaden that out and triangulate how people are accessing services and what compromises they have to make.

Many of the people that we engaged with during our audit work spoke about relying on support from others, where that is available to them, which can involve some significant personal compromises. For example, they might need to share sensitive medical information, their financial details or their passwords. Sometimes, that involves multiple passwords. That is significant.

We question whether it should be necessary for people to make those compromises in order to access vital public services.

Those are clear challenges for people who are already facing difficulties such as poverty. We frame our report as being about digital exclusion, but there are broad and overlapping definitions, and others would refer to “digital poverty”.

The Convener: Your report says that that has potential to make an unequal society more unequal. Paragraph 18 talks about the negative impacts. People who are digitally excluded are less likely to have access to information in general, are less likely to have access to the jobs market or to know about their children’s education and are less able to maximise their financial position because they cannot get access to things that would be cheaper if they could use that route. They can incur debts or have heightened social isolation. All those results compound inequalities, rather than addressing them.

The Government’s stated position in “A Changing Nation” is that

“We tackle poverty by sharing opportunities, wealth and power more equally.”

It does not seem to me that there is a lot of evidence of that.

Stephen Boyle: Very much so. As you said, paragraph 18 sets out quite starkly the impact of digital exclusion on educational opportunities, training, social interaction, basic information and the opportunities that many of us take for granted. The stated ambition as we all move forward in adopting digital technology is that we must not do the opposite of what is intended, which is to make this a more straightforward place for us to live and operate. We risk excluding yet more people as the pace of change quickens.

The Convener: Graham Simpson, did you want to come in briefly at this point?

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Yes, very briefly, because there was a mention of Near Me. I do not know if that is an app or a service—I will call it a service. Did you do any research on how many people actually have access to that?

Stephen Boyle: Bernie Milligan might want to say a bit more about that. However, as we mentioned in the case study, this is a relatively new arrangement. That is one aspect that I would highlight.

I will make two further points. NHS Near Me currently provides more than 30,000 consultations per month in the NHS in Scotland, which is a success with regard to access arrangements. Our report seeks to highlight that that reflects the fact

that digital technology is going to change. Our key recommendation is that, as the pace of such change develops, the system should engage with the public. Public bodies have to engage with service users, and NHS Near Me did that by involving people in the design of the service.

As Bernie Milligan has mentioned, there is no doubt that NHS Near Me will suit some people. It allows them to access general practitioner services more conveniently, and perhaps more quickly, than they might otherwise be able to if they are required to follow the more traditional route of phoning their GP practice to arrange an appointment—depending on how straightforward or otherwise that might be in the current climate. Bernie can say a bit more about the detail behind our approach, but I would point out that we tried to achieve a balance in the report by saying that, as this is one of the approaches that public bodies will be using, they will need to get things right by using co-design right at the start.

Graham Simpson: Before you come in, Bernie, I should say that what I am after is whether you know what percentage of GP practices are offering the service. You might not, because it is quite difficult to find out that information. As you will know, surgeries are all individual businesses, so it is difficult to find out what their working practices are. I just wondered whether you had that percentage.

Bernie Milligan: No. I do not have any stats on that, other than the one in the report about there being around 33,000 consultations every month. We do know that there was a very low base prior to the pandemic. Some reports include statistics on the growth in the use of Near Me, but we do not have that stat and I am not sure whether it exists.

There are aspirations for the use of Near Me to go beyond the NHS. For example, work is currently being done on enabling Social Security Scotland and care services to use it as a tool for video consultations. I am sure that the Government could say more about that.

The Convener: I am keen to move things on. Our deputy convener has a number of questions to put to you. Over to you, Jamie.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Good morning to you, Auditor General, and your colleagues. I will start with a question that is less about the specific content of the report and more about the overarching theme that you want us to take away from it.

On the one hand, I am getting the impression that, as the committee often hears with such reports, we are pushing the Government to go further and faster on public service reform. It is said that too many public services still involve clunky, physical, paper-based systems that are not

digitised and not modern in ways that they could and should be. On the other hand, though, we seem to be beating the Government with a stick for moving too fast and leaving people behind.

I am therefore not quite sure what the overarching theme of this report is. Is it that the Government is going too fast and needs to take people with it, or is it that it needs to pick up the pace of digital reform while not leaving people behind—or is it perhaps both?

Stephen Boyle: I think that it is both. In a moment, I will give Mike Neilson a chance to say a bit more about the councils' perspective on that.

Stepping away from the digital report for a moment, the theme is the challenging state of public finances, which we have been highlighting for a while, and therefore the sustainability of current arrangements to deliver public services. Public service reform is therefore an essential component of addressing the challenges that such services face, and nothing in the report that we are discussing today detracts from that.

We found in our audit that delivering effective public service reform means adopting digital technologies. In doing so, public services must retain a recognition that many people in Scotland cannot access services digitally, as they will need to. They might not have acquired the necessary digital skills or might not have the means to access digital services, because of issues with devices, internet tariffs and so on. If that does not work, there must be a safety net that allows them to access public services through some of the more traditional forms and channels.

Forgive me for stating the obvious, but public services are not businesses. A business can herd—that is the term that is used—its customers on to a digital platform, but public services do not have that opportunity. They must consider how they can successfully bring people into a digital environment or how they can have the safety net of a range of different means of access.

We address a range of themes in the report. I think it appropriate to bring in Mike Neilson here, as he is one of its co-authors.

Mike Neilson (Accounts Commission): One important idea in the report is the need to improve the quality of digital services. That includes making them more easily usable so that they do not require lots of information or passwords and having a degree of consistency across different services so that pressing a button on one service does the same as it would on another. All those things should contribute to addressing the aspects of digital exclusion that relate to skills and confidence.

To go back to your question, I would say that things are moving fast in that way in order to get greater consistency across Government services. One reason for our producing a joint report is that the once-for-Scotland message is important in making life easier for people who face challenges—and for the rest of us, too.

At the other end of the spectrum, the most vulnerable groups need a combination of better services and really effective local understanding of the nature, extent and location of digital exclusion. That is central to helping the most vulnerable and those for whom a digital solution can be only part of the answer. In our work, we saw some good examples of that happening and of engagement with local communities to get a clear picture of the challenges that they face and to take a strategic approach to addressing issues, which include connectivity, skills and confidence and the cost of services. That is how they are working in Renfrewshire as well as in Perth and Kinross.

This is a joint report. It is really important to have an overall strategy for the Scottish public sector that specifically addresses all the causes of digital exclusion, because that will give a framework for local actions.

Jamie Greene: Is that not part of the problem, Auditor General? The language that you use in the report and which you have repeated in your opening statement is relatively harsh in its analysis. You say that

“leadership ... has weakened”,

that

“momentum has ... slowed”

and that there is a lack of an action plan and a lack of lines of responsibility. These are common themes that we on the committee hear arising from a wide range of public services and from Government management and oversight of them. Do those things come as a surprise to you? Is there a feeling that it is perhaps not that the Government has taken its eye off the ball, due to pressures on public finances, but that its eye was never on the ball in the first place? I am trying to get a feel for whether the direction of travel is towards a worsening situation or whether the strategy was never there in the first place.

09:30

Stephen Boyle: There are a number of strands to that, deputy convener, and I hope to pick them up in my response.

There has been momentum. Certainly, during the pandemic, the work of the connecting Scotland initiative with public bodies across the country—especially its engagement with the third sector—had a very significant impact on tackling digital

exclusion. As we mention, more than 60,000 households in Scotland received devices or support to tackle digital exclusion.

Colleagues might want to say more about connecting Scotland. Clearly, that was an emergency response put in place during Covid, among the many other responses made by the public services, and it is reasonable to say that the model was not sustainable in cost or wider resources. In effect, the evaluation of connecting Scotland found that the dominance of the one-to-one support model could not continue, as the required level of public funding would not be available to support it.

The report's judgment on leadership and momentum is based on a number of aspects. I draw to the committee's attention the timeline in exhibit 4, in which we trace back to 2011 digital strategies and ambitions to tackle digital exclusion. There were very positive developments. In the report by the Accounts Commission and me, we cite strong examples of the public service adapting and bringing service users with it as it has changed the way in which services are delivered. Perhaps the high point was during the emergency of the pandemic.

We are confident in our judgment that momentum has stalled. We have the joint national strategy from March 2021. As you mentioned—and alluding, I suppose, to some of our other work in recent months—strategies have the best chance of being successful when underpinned by clear next steps: clear action plans, good governance, clarity on leadership and timescales, and resources to go with that. That is where we think that momentum has stalled. There is no clarity on who will do what next and how it will be paid for.

Without that, there is a risk that the progress that has happened at points over the past decade will not be carried through—especially now, given the ever-challenging fiscal context in which Scottish public services are operating. As the convener referenced, 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.

Jamie Greene: That timeline is stark. To put a pin point on it, when I joined the Parliament in 2016, I sat in a committee room not far from here, in which we discussed the procurement of the reaching 100 per cent—R100—programme, yet your report points to the fact that around 10 per cent of people still do not have access to the internet. Some eight years—nearly a decade—on from that time, a large chunk of people do not

have digital skills or digital access. That speaks for itself.

Is there any particular reason why progress on the R100 programme—which means, presumably, reaching 100 per cent of the population—was not quite included in this report? I appreciate that there is some overlap with some of the work that Ofcom has been doing, but surely the infrastructure needs to be there before you can start teaching people the skills to use it.

Stephen Boyle: You are right. For absolute clarity, our audit did not consider the progress of the R100 programme or other broadband connectivity programmes. My predecessor reported to the predecessor committee on the progress of the R100 programme. I am keeping it under review as part of my forward work programme, and I might return to it in future years as progress develops.

Branching off from that slightly, I will draw on the experience of our advisory panel and those with lived experience of digital exclusion. We spoke to people in rural areas of Scotland. There is a perhaps stark quote in the report from a person from Argyll and Bute who talked about an ambition to return to the area having studied in the central belt but who felt that the quality of internet connection was a barrier to them and others from the area, meaning that there was a barrier to working from home or starting a business.

We have not looked at the R100 programme in detail in today's report, but we are keeping it on the radar.

Jamie Greene: Obviously, addressing the associated effects of rural depopulation and tackling digital exclusion are key drivers to repopulating rural and island communities.

This is perhaps a more macro question. Was there any expectation in the draft report that some of those issues might have been addressed in the human rights bill that we expected to see in the programme for government? Is there any feeling of disappointment that that has not featured in the Government's legislative plans? What effect will that have on the ability to ensure that everyone in Scotland is digitally included?

Stephen Boyle: Jillian Matthew might want to talk about our progress in tracking the human rights bill, but the committee will know that it is neither my nor the Accounts Commission's role to comment on the merits or progress of individual policy choices that the Government and Parliament choose to make.

We have sought to reflect human rights more generally in our audit methodology over the past few years. We have sought to reflect the fact that audit work is relevant to people and that we are

tracking human rights alongside our audit work and weaving it in where appropriate.

Jillian might want to say a bit more.

Jillian Matthew: We are involved in discussions on the development of the human rights bill proposals. We are aware that it has been delayed slightly, but we started this work before the proposals for the bill had been put forward. As the Auditor General says, we now consider our work much more from an equalities angle and from the human rights side of things.

We had discussions about people's digital rights as part of this audit. Digital and internet access itself is not a human right, but it is becoming an essential utility to be able to take part in public services and have your rights realised, so it is important from that angle, which came through strongly in our discussions.

When we spoke to people in the two council areas where we did the fieldwork, we did not necessarily ask them about their rights, but, as we talked through the issues that they were facing, it became clear that some of their rights were not being met. We set out in exhibit 2 on pages 13 and 14—you can see that quite a lot came out in discussions on that topic—the different aspects of human rights and how they are affected if people are digitally excluded.

We are certainly aware of the issue and are building it into our work much more. We will think about the human rights bill and how it affects our work as it develops. It is a priority area for us at the moment.

Jamie Greene: That is great news. I was really taken aback by the statistic that one in six Scots lack foundation-level digital skills—not advanced digital skills, but basic digital skills. How does that compare with other parts of Europe and the United Kingdom? Are we faring well, or is that the world average at the moment?

Jillian Matthew: Bernie Milligan can say more about the stats, but it is quite difficult to get reliable information. A lot of the information is based on UK statistics. A lot of them will be similar or the same for Scotland, but we did not look too widely. Is there anything else that you want to say, Bernie?

Bernie Milligan: The Lloyds survey is seen as the benchmark in digital skills. It is carried out annually and looks at foundation-level digital skills such as being able to turn on a device or being able to manage passwords or a wi-fi connection. That survey reports on different parts of the United Kingdom. Statistics for Scotland show that 15 per cent of people do not have all eight of the foundation skills that are surveyed. The UK-wide statistic for the same period is 16 per cent. It is

also worth noting that the Scotland statistic remained the same as the previous year's, so there seems to be a wee bit of flatlining.

The report shows the complexity of digital exclusion. We have had to draw on a number of different national data sets about skills and access to internet connection at home, and we have also used Ofcom data about who is affected.

Jamie Greene: I might come back in with other questions later.

The Convener: Graham Simpson wants to pick up on some of those points and develop others.

Graham Simpson: I will go back to the question about R100. I am a bit puzzled as to why you did not go into that a little more deeply, because it is surely key. If people do not have access to the internet, they are automatically digitally excluded. What was the reason behind your decision not to go into that?

Stephen Boyle: When framing any piece of work, we take a view on the key components of policy development, implementation and what we want to achieve from the audit, as well as looking at whether we have done any other work on that area.

We have done work on R100. I cannot recall exactly off the top of my head, but I think that it was at the start of my term in office. I think I inherited our work on R100. I can correct that if it is inaccurate, but, if memory serves, we produced an update on the R100 programme in late 2020. As I have recently said in writing to the committee, that remains part of my thinking about future audit work.

Mr Simpson, you suggested that that is a key factor. I think that superfast broadband and the roll-out of the R100 programme is one factor in digital exclusion, but it is not the sole factor. Our report set out other drivers, such as whether people have the skills and confidence to use digital technology. That might or might not be influenced by whether they have internet in their home or by whether public services are designed to support access and tackle digital exclusion.

I reassure the committee that R100 remains on my list of topics to return to in future, but, in our engagement, the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland felt that it was not so fundamental as to cause us to pause or delay the development of our work on digital exclusion, which might be a precursor to other work that we bring to the committee in relatively short order. That work will be about public service reform more generally and about efficiencies in public finances. As those projects move at pace, public services should remain very mindful of the need for access for all

the population and not just for those who are digitally enabled.

Graham Simpson: Let me turn that on its head a bit. Digital exclusion might be a choice for some people. You do not have to have a mobile phone or a computer, and some people might choose not to have either because that is just the way that they want to go through life. There is a cost to those things, and it is not always cheap to have broadband in your home or a mobile phone with full internet access. Is there a risk that people who make the choice not to be digitally connected will be excluded from public services? We are talking about public services, after all.

09:45

Stephen Boyle: I will speculate on that, but it might be helpful for the committee to hear from other colleagues and for us to convey the views of people who consider themselves to be digitally excluded, including about whether that was a choice that they made or that was made for them, which is a fundamental difference.

If people choose—as is their right—not to have a mobile phone or the internet in their home, at a very basic level, they should still be able to access vital public services. That might not be in the way that they would have accessed services 20 or 30 years ago, but there should be a safety net in society to give people access to services. I suspect that that is probably not the case for the vast majority of people now. To successfully access the workplace, skills, training, social interactions and more cost-effective goods and services, very many of us now have access to the internet.

I go back to the convener's opening question about the statistics, which suggest that people who are experiencing other barriers are those who are most likely to be digitally excluded. I will hand over to Jillian Matthew and Bernie Milligan in a moment—Mike Neilson might also want to come in. On the point about one of the barriers being access to the internet and mobile phones, our report refers to what are known as social tariffs, which are for members of the public who are economically disadvantaged. Ofcom has set out the provision of social tariffs through the providers of broadband and mobile services, but we found that, although eligibility was clear, only a very small percentage of people are taking up those tariffs. There is a gap, so something is not quite working with regard to the provision and promotion of those tariffs. We note that in our report, and one of our recommendations is that the Government and public bodies engage with providers and Ofcom about what more can be done to support uptake.

Graham Simpson: Is the low uptake because people are not aware of the tariffs?

Stephen Boyle: Jillian Matthew can say more about that. Awareness is an issue but perhaps the definition of the tariffs is also a problem. What is required for a social tariff is also a factor in order for people to engage with the service. I will hand over to Jillian to set out what people told us about whether digital exclusion was a choice that was being made by them or by others.

Jillian Matthew: I think that it is both. Some people choose not to have a smartphone. Others had the technology but the issue came back to skills, good access or affordability. The Auditor General spoke about social tariffs. Only 8 per cent of eligible households had signed up for social tariffs, so there is a lot more availability. In paragraphs 84 and 85 of our report, we set out the fact that there is a lack of awareness of the tariffs but also that some of those tariffs are still too expensive for some people, which goes back to the really strong link between poverty and digital exclusion.

So many services are now online. We say in the report that that is fine—it has benefits, it works for a lot of people and it makes it easier for many people to access services—but that there should be alternative methods for those who are unable to do that or who do not have the skills. It could be a really straightforward thing such as having a phone number, because some people said that they could not even find a phone number on the website of a council or other service provider in order to speak to someone in person, and a lot of offices are now closed.

However, in areas where we see good practice, there are community hubs, and libraries are supporting people. Those are fairly straightforward approaches that go back to the idea of working with other services to help people to access them, and to provide support when they cannot do so by themselves.

I do not know whether Bernie Milligan or Mike Neilson has anything else on that.

Mike Neilson: I do not have much to add. It is understandable that a public service provider would want to encourage people to use digital channels, because they are, by orders of magnitude, cheaper per unit. However, it is about getting the right balance so that, although people are encouraged to use digital channels, there are alternatives for those who, for whatever reason, are unwilling or unable to use them. As Jillian Matthew has said, the most basic service is for people to be able to find the phone number. We know the frustration that can be experienced when trying to do that.

The point about people choosing not to be online can relate to concerns about the security aspects of exposing personal information and so on. Another facet of addressing digital exclusion is therefore to provide greater reassurance that our systems are robust.

Graham Simpson: You are right, Mike. The moment that people go online, they potentially expose themselves to risk. Although everyone in this room probably has access to digital, there might be some out there who think, "That's too risky for me."

I will move on. Earlier, we discussed the human rights issue. I am drawn to exhibit 2 in your report, where you give examples of areas in which human rights could be affected. My general question on that is whether you think that such rights are being impacted or, indeed, breached because people do not have access to digital services.

Stephen Boyle: That was certainly the view of some of the people we spoke to. In that exhibit, we sought to use feedback from the focus groups that we held and to draw on evidence from the third sector. We mapped human rights to examples of digital exclusion in areas such as accessibility, the pace of change, people's skills and confidence, and public bodies' ability to provide services equitably.

Rather than form definitive judgments that individuals' human rights were being breached, which I suspect would involve matters of law, we sought to highlight potential areas where public bodies delivering services today might consider public service reform, which would probably include greater adoption of digital technologies. As they consider that, they should think about what it means from the individual's perspective.

I highlight that, in the report, we also examined design principles for the future of public services. We suggested our own principles for the types of areas that public bodies should consider when making changes, so that human rights are borne in mind and we have equitable access in the provision of such services.

Graham Simpson: Neither of us is a lawyer, but, if human rights are being breached, is there not then a risk that the Scottish Government, and indeed other public authorities, could face legal action?

Stephen Boyle: As I have said, that is a risk. This area potentially involves human rights. In our report, we set out not to adjudicate on those but to highlight the pace of change. 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.

Graham Simpson: I have one more question, which is about the digital inclusion alliance. Perhaps you could explain what on earth that is. While you are answering that, could you tell us why its launch did not go ahead? Perhaps you could go on to discuss the digital citizen unit, tell us what that is and why there has been slow progress on it since it was formed.

Stephen Boyle: I will bring in colleagues to set out some of the structural and governance arrangements to address digital inclusion.

There are a number of players in the environment. The Scottish Government and COSLA share ambitions, and there is long-established engagement with third sector organisations and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, with regard to the reach that voluntary organisations in Scotland have in the provision of services. Strategies are fine, but we need to have clear governance and action plans to support them. Bernie Milligan can talk about the digital inclusion alliance as well as the work of the digital citizen unit in the Government.

Bernie Milligan: A commitment was made to establish the digital inclusion alliance in the full business case for Connecting Scotland, which was approved in 2023. We understand that the alliance aims to facilitate connections across sectors by, for example, encouraging the public sector to work with private sector internet service providers and to come together with the third sector to secure outcomes to address digital exclusion. That work is at quite a developmental stage. There has been a short-life working group and COSLA has worked with the Government on that. A launch was planned for March, but we have not seen the results of that. We would expect to have had some clarity on the members of the alliance, its remit and the outcomes that it is aiming to achieve. However, we have not seen that as yet.

Graham Simpson: What does the digital citizen division do and why has progress been so slow?

Bernie Milligan: It is a unit in the digital directorate of the Scottish Government that has responsibility for the Connecting Scotland programme, the digital inclusion alliance and the development of various initiatives to address digital exclusion. We are not clear why things have been slow. We recognise that Connecting Scotland was set up during the pandemic and it moved at quite a pace. The scale of activity was huge, with 1,000 organisations and all councils involved in its delivery. After that, from around early 2022, there was a pause while the Government looked at its ambitions for the programme. An outline business case was approved in March 2022 and the full business case was not approved until June 2023, which was more than a year later. The new post-

pandemic programme for Connecting Scotland, which is quite different from the original programme, was launched at the end of 2023 and is under way at the moment. We recognise that progress has been slow with that as well as with the digital inclusion alliance. One of the underlying reasons is that there has been a change in the financial context, but it would be for the Government to give more detail on that.

Graham Simpson: That is for the Government to answer; it is certainly not for you to say why the Government set up those bodies and did not do anything about them.

The Convener: Before I bring in Colin Beattie, I will go back to exhibit 2, which looks at the human rights of people who are potentially affected by digital exclusion. It identifies examples of that, including blue badge holders; people not being able to access council tax reductions or their welfare benefits accounts; ethnic minority citizens not being able to access services that they are entitled to, because of language barriers; and welfare sanctions for people who cannot upload their journals online.

The report highlights that the application process for a blue badge is online only. How does that sit with the stated aims of COSLA and the Scottish Government on the lenses of inclusion and offering signposted alternatives? If the application process is exclusively online, it will, almost inevitably, exclude people who are entitled to a blue badge.

10:00

Stephen Boyle: That is why we highlighted the situation in our report. It feels that there is a contradiction between the population that is likely to need to access that service and the mechanism through which they are required to do that by public services. The question that we are asking, if you will permit me, is: are public bodies or councils—Mike Neilson might want to say more—content with that? Do they know that that arrangement is working for the people who need to access that service? We are not clear that that is the case.

The Convener: We are short of time, so we will move on to Colin Beattie to ask the next questions.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The report is timely. It is a long time since I have seen statistics on digital exclusion. In fact, the last time that I had a figure for my area of Midlothian was pre-Covid, and it was scary. Ofcom said that 34 per cent of people did not have access to the internet or a smart phone. As we will probably discuss later, Covid

moved that situation on, which is a very welcome benefit for those concerned.

The audit focus group highlighted the fact that people often have to rely on third parties and family members for informal support in order to access digital services, such as paying utility bills online, which is a concern. Can you expand on the focus group's findings, particularly with regard to the impact that that can have on those who need help?

Stephen Boyle: I will start and then bring colleagues in. I highlight paragraph 27 at the start of section 2 of our report. That reliance on other people to access digital services in order to pay bills or rent, including requiring friends or neighbours to take meter readings and, potentially, disclosing personal financial or medical information—albeit that might be to a relative or friend—means that it is not straightforward or easy enough for people to access digital services themselves. We have touched this morning and in the report on some of the reasons for that, including access to digital skills or devices, but it is also about the design of public services. Public bodies themselves need to be absolutely clear that they are not inadvertently excluding yet more people through well-intentioned efforts to increase the pace of digital technology developments and some of the financial imperatives around that, which Mike Neilson referred to.

We can be clear about some of the impact, which we set out in the report, but, to add more colour, Jillian Matthew might want to say more about the detail of the feedback that the focus group shared with us.

Jillian Matthew: As the Auditor General has said, the impact of digital exclusion can be quite severe for a lot of people, and we have touched on some of the issues around that this morning. As we have said, the people who are affected are often those who are already disadvantaged and they are then further excluded from accessing the services that they need. Often, they are the people who need a lot of support from public services. If they cannot get that support, that will obviously have a big impact. It is not necessarily one service—people might be trying to access multiple things—so it is about the overall effect on people.

We are finding that public bodies are often not aware of that issue and do not consider it when they move services online. They are not thinking about people being unable to access services and what the impact of that will be. 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.

With regard to some of the impacts, as we have said, that approach limits people's access to services but also their wider life opportunities, and it can affect their quality of life. For example, the lack of access to services can increase social isolation and make it difficult to access information. If it is difficult to apply for jobs and gain skills, that also has an impact on economic and financial wellbeing. People can be unable to shop around or make online payments, which can mean that they get into debt. Again, it can have a cumulative effect.

The more problems or difficulties that people have, the more frustrated they get. They can then be less likely to engage with services, and they might not trust services, Government, the council or whatever body provides the service. The more support and assistance that people can have when they are having difficulties accessing online services, the more they will be encouraged to use them and to get better digital access—albeit there should also be alternative ways to access the services.

Colin Beattie: On the statistics that indicate where there is exclusion, if someone is using family members and so on in order to access the internet and do some essential day-to-day stuff online, does that mask the issue in the figures? In other words, how do you know that people are doing that and what proportion of people are doing that? Is that figure of 15 per cent actually 20 per cent? How do you work that out?

Jillian Matthew: We do not work out the statistics. We rely on statistics that have been collected by national organisations. However, it might be the case that the figures are an underestimate, because people often rely on others to access services—of course, some people do not have anyone to rely on. However, from talking to other national organisations, such as Age Scotland and Citizens Advice Scotland, we know that they also get a lot of inquiries. That is the benefit of having community hubs or libraries that provide access. The statistics are not entirely reliable but they are the best information that we have. Bernie Milligan might want to speak about the stats.

Colin Beattie: If someone does not have anyone to support them, it is easy to pick that up, statistically, but, if they are getting support and assistance with day-to-day access, you could argue that they are okay. However, there are questions about confidentiality and all sorts of things involved in that situation as well as the right that people have to access services. Clearly, there is no real way to pick that up and any figure for that would be a guesstimate.

Stephen Boyle: There is an element of that. We are content about the sources that we refer to

in the report, and we recognise that some of it is voluntary disclosure of information. There will be surveys and samples and, thereafter, the sample will be extrapolated across the wider population. There are more detailed geographical statistics with regard to broadband roll-out and the provision of high-speed internet, which are analysed on both a council and constituency basis, so there are details behind that information.

However, I agree with your point. In those statistics, there are enough people who are telling us about not having the skills or internet access in their homes to make this a really important issue. Especially given the pace of change that we have been speaking about and the further digitisation of public service delivery, this feels quite timely—I am grateful for your feedback that that is the case—as a reminder to public services, as they go through that change at pace, that they need to design public services with all users of the services at the heart of that change.

Colin Beattie: I am looking at exhibit 3 in your report, which sets out programmes that tackle digital exclusion, and Scotland's digital participation charter. The approach that is adopted in the charter is described as ethical and inclusive. Those are fine words, but what does that actually mean, and has there been any evaluation of the charter's impact?

Bernie Milligan: The digital participation charter has been around for some time. There was a relaunch a couple of weeks ago, so there is now a new digital inclusion charter. In essence, that is a refresh of the digital participation charter. That work is being led by SCVO and has been supported by the Government.

The charter is underpinned by essential digital skills. It is a means of making sure that staff and volunteers have essential digital skills and that they can support service users, citizens and so on to develop them. That is where the ethical and inclusive language comes in.

In 2023, there were 700 signatories to the digital participation charter, mostly in the voluntary sector, but also in the private and public sectors. The new inclusion charter is a refresh. It is about trying to bring it to light again and to get more organisations involved in the effort.

Colin Beattie: Has there been any actual evaluation of the impact?

Bernie Milligan: I am not aware of any evaluation of the charter. The fund that sits alongside the charter has existed since 2014. It is a small grant programme for mostly voluntary sector organisations to do digital skills work. We have not seen a particular evaluation of the impact of that.

Colin Beattie: Is there any intention that an evaluation should take place? Is that part of the programme?

Bernie Milligan: I would need to check with the Government. We would probably have to get an update on that.

Stephen Boyle: It may be worth touching on the evaluation of Connecting Scotland, if that is part of your thinking. Connecting Scotland was an entity that was set up during the pandemic. We have mentioned a couple of times this morning the roll-out of emergency digital access during the pandemic. That reached £50 million spent for 61,000 households in the country, and there has been an evaluation of that activity.

I suppose that it informs where we have got to today in relation to the next stage of service delivery. Paragraph 33 of the report references users noting an increase in digital skills confidence—for example, younger people in households were able to continue participating in online learning and school work. It also supported access to employment opportunities.

The only other thing to note about the project, which was supported by third sector partners, is that it is an expensive model. The conclusion about the sustainability of that primarily one-to-one support was that it could not be continued.

We have touched on where the project goes next with the transition plan and how it will evolve into the next phase while being supported by strategies and funding. How that will be taken forward within the strategy with clear action plans and responsibilities feels like one of the key gaps to us.

Colin Beattie: You moved smoothly on to my next question, which was about Connecting Scotland. I think that you have answered that.

What has the joint national digital strategy achieved so far? Can you clarify what impact the lack of a clear plan and accountability has on tackling digital exclusion?

Stephen Boyle: Although today's report notes the presence of the joint digital strategy, Mike Neilson may want to say a bit more about COSLA's role in that. I do not wish to labour the point, Mr Beattie, but it lacks a clear delivery plan with detailed actions about how ambitions and policy intent to tackle digital exclusion will be taken forward and the respective roles of the Scottish Government, its digital departments and the local government Digital Office. We were surprised—Mike might want to say a bit more about this—that the local government Digital Office does not make reference in its strategy ambitions to digital exclusion, which, given its central role as it

evolves further provision of digital services in local authorities, felt like an omission.

10:15

Mike Neilson: One of the central choices for local government is whether to join up to a nationwide service. Do you do things once for Scottish local government or do you do things individually? One of the purposes of the national strategy is clearly to help with that first question about what will be done nationally. Some of the components are being led by the Scottish Government. Until now, the Digital Office has focused on encouraging the once for local government in Scotland approach, and the latest programme that the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers and the Improvement Service are working on—with regard to the council of the future—has two projects that relate to which services can be shared and done once, and therefore must be well designed and robust. It is also about what the digital future council looks like. There is a recognition that the Digital Office has an important role for digital services generally.

When it comes to digital exclusion, any role that the Digital Office has at the moment appears to be implicit rather than explicit, in that it works with local government to promote the Scottish design standards and the other related frameworks that help accessibility, but there appears to be a gap in relation to the range of digital exclusion issues and the support that can be given. It is fair to say that we were surprised that the Digital Office does not have a more explicit role in that area, but it also has to be recognised that, although some digital exclusion challenges are solved digitally, other areas can be very important—in particular, building digital inclusion into anti-poverty policies and other policies that address vulnerable groups. For local government, that might be a role not for the Digital Office but rather for the Improvement Service or other players that support local government.

Colin Beattie: Is there an assumption that everybody wants digital services? Is there an assumption that, if those programmes reach out to everybody who is digitally excluded, they will all be happy and cheerful and want to sign up? Or will there always be a core that, for various reasons—maybe by choice or because of physical disabilities or old age—will never pick those services up? Will we always have a proportion of people who need extra assistance?

Stephen Boyle: We think that it is absolutely the latter. Public services have to offer a choice so, although many of us seamlessly transition from traditional service models and embrace digital service provision alternatives, that does not work

for everybody. It is a question of whether the choice about how service models are delivered is made by individuals or, more worryingly, is made for them by public services. If it is the latter, it has to be backed up with connected work across the public services—local government, service providers and the third sector—so that people are equipped with the necessary skills, devices and routes to continue to access public services in an equitable way. That is the core of today's report from us, Mr Beattie.

Colin Beattie: I am conscious of the time, but I have a couple of quick questions. In March 2021, in its “Key audit themes: Managing public sector ICT projects” report, our predecessor committee recommended that the Scottish Government should appoint

“a senior individual ... to assume overall responsibility and oversight of all public sector IT projects.”

The Scottish Government responded to say that it would “consider” that as part of its work

“to deliver the updated digital strategy.”

Are you aware of whether that recommendation was actioned?

Stephen Boyle: I would need to follow that up and perhaps come back to the committee in writing. In the interim, I point out that, on many occasions, the committee has heard from Scottish Government representatives such as the digital director, and the director general for corporate, who has overall responsibility for the delivery of such services. It has also heard from a range of witnesses on major ICT projects. Rather than give an answer on the spot, Mr Beattie, I will need to check that point and come back to you. I am sure that the Government would be able to provide clarity on it, too.

Colin Beattie: That is fine.

My final question is for Mike Neilson. Why does the Digital Office for Scottish local government not include digital exclusion as part of its work programme? Is there any sign that that approach might be amended?

Mike Neilson: In the latest update, which I think was a month or so ago, there was no explicit reference to exclusion. However, I go back to my earlier point that work on some aspects of digital exclusion, such as better-quality service design, is built into the office's core programme. The real issue lies with other aspects of digital exclusion, on which there seems to be a gap in local government collectively.

Colin Beattie: But the work programme does not have it as a separate item.

Mike Neilson: Exactly.

Colin Beattie: Thank you.

The Convener: I have a quick question before I bring in our final questioner. We read in the report that the Government proposes having a “minimum digital living standard”. Could you tell us a little bit more about what on earth that is?

Stephen Boyle: Yes, we can. I refer members to section 3 of our report. The Government has set out its ambition to introduce such a standard. It might be helpful for the committee if I were to read out that it would include

“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.”

That would build on work that has been done by academics at the University of Liverpool, which is supported by many organisations across the country, on the overarching themes in how services can be delivered equitably and fairly. Our report notes that, although the Government has set out that ambition, it has not yet mapped that through to show how it would deliver it.

The Convener: Thank you. That is helpful.

I will move on. Our final questioner is Fulton MacGregor, who, fittingly, given the topic of this morning's evidence, is joining us digitally, by video link, from North Lanarkshire.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Good morning to the panel. You have stolen my line, convener—I was about to comment on the fact that I am joining the meeting digitally.

I have enjoyed this morning's session so far. It has been very interesting. I have a couple of questions. The report sets out the measures that Social Security Scotland has in place to minimise digital exclusion, which include non-digital facilities to apply for benefits and the availability of face-to-face guidance and home visits. Does any member of the panel know whether those measures are being shared with other public bodies? If so, how is that being done?

Stephen Boyle: In a moment, I will bring in my colleagues to develop on what I say, but I will respond first.

As I mentioned earlier, as ever, we were keen that our report should be balanced, but it has been important to show that there are good areas of good practice. At the core of your question is the idea that, if a public body is doing well by offering a range of channels for people to access its services, and those are working effectively, it should then share its approach with other such bodies.

I am just checking with my colleagues to see whether we have examples of evaluating such approaches and their adoption elsewhere.

Jillian Matthew: The point that we are making in this section of the report is that good things are happening in parts of the Scottish Government, in different directorates, but that not enough is happening around that learning. Those measures are being developed in Social Security Scotland and the digital health and care directorate, and there is probably some learning, but it is not being done in a consistent and systematic way that feeds into the overall actions and leadership around that.

Bernie Milligan: I will just add that it is about collaboration and shared learning across the Government, which has been lacking. With regard to governance structures, exhibit 5 in our report notes that there is a digital board in the Scottish Government, which is largely made up of those at officer level. However, that has not met for some time. With regard to the review of the digital strategy, although there is an update on the connecting Scotland programme, we are not really getting a flavour of the other things that are happening elsewhere in Government, such as in Social Security Scotland and through the digital health and care initiatives. One of our recommendations is to establish a community of learning to allow more collaborative learning to happen across Government.

Fulton MacGregor: A recent BBC news article reported that £10 million of funding for the connecting Scotland programme was to be suspended during this financial year. Can you comment on the impact that that might have on tackling digital exclusion and the implementation of your recommendations in the report?

Stephen Boyle: Like you, Mr MacGregor, we have seen some of the recent emergency spending controls that the Government has put in place in order to deliver financial balance in this financial year. We have work under way, which we will bring to the committee later in this calendar year, on public service reform and fiscal sustainability. However, that perhaps echoes conclusions that we have reached in the past couple of years when there have been in-year spending controls. The Government and its partners know what the impact is going to be. It is perhaps not for us as auditors to say what the impact will be, but there are clear strands in our report about the impact that digital exclusion can have. However, as spending controls and choices are made in-year, the Government needs to be absolutely clear about the impact that those will have—perhaps not in isolation in one financial year but in future financial years. We will be following that up during the course of our current

work, and we will bring that to the committee later this year.

Fulton MacGregor: My final line of questioning is on council digital services. The report highlights the fact that, as I think we all find in the cases of our constituents at times, those services are not always easy to access. Your report looks at some of the strategies of particular councils, almost as good-practice examples. There is probably good practice on the part of different digital services even within councils. What further support is required from the Scottish Government and COSLA to ensure that some of the positive work that the councils are doing to eliminate digital exclusion is being shared and applied at a more national level so that the approach does not depend on someone's postcode and the council area that they live in?

Mike Neilson: As Bernie Milligan has mentioned, the starting point is a community of learning. Sometimes, communities of learning can be a substitute for action, but in this case it is essential that, where there is good practice, it is shared.

The second big issue is that there is still a tendency to design and think about individual services as opposed to the impact of the range of services that a particular individual needs. That is one of the places where it is about considering the local challenge and the importance of effective collaboration, whether between health and social care and local government, or in the broader community planning context, in order to ensure that services are being delivered locally in a way that is conscious of the risks that digital exclusion poses.

As to what more COSLA should be doing, there is a need for support from the centre in relation to driving towards greater consistency of services and shared services to simplify life for those who are at the edge of digital exclusion.

I will hand back the one about what the Scottish Government should be doing.

10:30

Stephen Boyle: I add that there is a partnership between the Scottish Government and COSLA in relation to the national strategy. Yes, there is a role for Government in that, but it is also about recognising—as Mike Neilson referred to—the local government service design group. There are structures in place in relation to drawing together good practice.

We have case studies in the report from Perth and Kinross Council and Renfrewshire Council about where digital services are working well and in an inclusive way. There is the infrastructure to

use that. The local government service design group has 17 councils in place. There is therefore a question for the other councils about whether that is the right setting for them and how they are sharing good practice from where it is working well and applying that knowledge carefully.

The Convener: We have time for one final quick question, which I invite the deputy convener to put.

Jamie Greene: I will be as quick as I can. I will do it in two halves.

Did any analysis take place around the mygov.scot portal, which seems to claim glowing success, with 2.3 million users in Scotland and the sign-up of more than 40 organisations? Not many of my constituents who I speak to have ever heard of it or use it, but it seems to be a glowing success. Was that part of the analysis?

Stephen Boyle: I will bring in colleagues to say a bit more—the people with me can say more about the mygov.scot portal—but one of the reasons for the growth in numbers is perhaps that it is part of the arrangements for the national entitlement cards. Accessing free bus travel can require children and young people to have an account on mygov.scot. However, we have not done any detailed analysis of its success or otherwise, unless colleagues want to tell me otherwise.

Jamie Greene: That is fine. It sounds like something that may have potential for growth in providing more inclusive services or access to more public services, as part of a wider strategy, if the infrastructure is already there.

The second half of my question—I am sorry to be cheeky, convener—is on the social tariff issue, which I am still trying to get my head around. Around 5 or 8 per cent—I was not sure which—of those who are eligible to take up a social tariff are doing so.

I had a quick look, and those tariffs range from about £12 to £25 per month, depending on what sort of speeds you want, from 15Mbps up to about 150Mbps. It is not bad; it gives you basic access. Is there a place for Government subsidy in that area, even at a basic level? For example, 100,000 households connected at basic speeds at £12 a month would cost the Government £14 million per year, but it would bring 100,000 households straight into the digital sphere. Is that the sort of intervention that you think would be helpful and which we should be probing the Government about?

Stephen Boyle: Those are the choices that the Government is currently facing. Members will of course be familiar with the challenging fiscal context, which means that prioritisation will be

required. Some of that is happening at a real pace, such as the connecting Scotland programme and some of the other emergency controls. Policy makers are clear about the opportunity cost of different choices that are made; whether it is further intervention in social tariffs or subsidies—as the deputy convener suggested—or not, the benefits are understood, both in the current financial year and into the future. However, clearly, those are policy choices for the Government and the Parliament.

Jamie Greene: The five major providers of internet and mobile telephony in the UK made more than £10 billion profit last year alone. If Government has no money, might there be a role for the private sector to chip in and show its charitable arm?

Stephen Boyle: My role is about the role of Government and the success of public spending. It is clear that the success and provision of internet mobile telephony will not be a state-led operation. However, regulators in Ofcom are clear that social tariffs play a role in supporting digital inclusion and access to wider public services. It is perhaps not for me to comment on the profits of mobile and broadband providers.

The Convener: On that very cautious note, I will draw the meeting to a close.

I thank Mike Neilson from the Accounts Commission, Bernie Milligan and Jillian Matthew from Audit Scotland and of course the Auditor General for the useful evidence that they have given.

We will consider what our next steps will be. I thank you very much, indeed, for your customary willingness to be as open and wide ranging as our questions ask you to be.

10:36

Meeting continued in private until 11:30.

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