



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

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# Public Audit Committee

Thursday 31 October 2024

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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**Thursday 31 October 2024**

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**PUBLIC AUDIT COMMITTEE**

**26<sup>th</sup> 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)

\*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

\*Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Lesley Fraser (Scottish Government)

Geoff Huggins (Scottish Government)

Eilidh McLaughlin (Scottish Government)

Martyn Wallace (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Lynn Russell

**LOCATION**

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)



## Scottish Parliament

### Public Audit Committee

*Thursday 31 October 2024*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]*

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Richard Leonard):** Good morning and welcome to the 26th meeting in 2024 of the Public Audit Committee. Our first agenda item is to consider whether to take items 3 and 4 in private. Is that agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Tackling Digital Exclusion

09:00

**The Convener:** Our main item is a further consideration of the joint report by the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission “Tackling digital exclusion”. I am pleased to welcome our witnesses: Lesley Fraser, director general corporate, Geoff Huggins, chief digital officer, and Eilidh McLaughlin, deputy director, digital ethics, inclusion and assurance—all at the Scottish Government; and Martyn Wallace, chief digital officer in the digital office for Scottish local government, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

There are no opening statements, so I will start the questions. I direct my first question to Lesley Fraser. Do you accept the findings and the recommendations in the Auditor General for Scotland and Accounts Commission report “Tackling digital exclusion”?

**Lesley Fraser (Scottish Government):** We do. The report is very timely and helpful. It shines a spotlight on a critically important issue for the Government and for everyone who provides public services. We absolutely acknowledge that having digital access to Government and public services is a necessity for the people of Scotland. It is so important, for example, in accessing public services such as Social Security Scotland. Getting access to employment is also increasingly important. Digital access is also important to being able to access good-value services and products. There is a whole set of reasons why tackling digital exclusion is important. The report is very helpful in highlighting areas in which the Government, along with our partners, can focus and make the biggest impact.

**The Convener:** Does that mean that you accept the criticism from the Auditor General that

“leadership ... has weakened ... and momentum has ... slowed”

since the Covid-19 pandemic?

**Lesley Fraser:** It is fair to say that the Covid pandemic was an enormous shock to the system. I am proud of the work that colleagues did at that time to respond and to transform access for people who were vulnerable because of the unique circumstances of the pandemic. As in many areas of Government and public services, the consequences of that time are issues that we are still working with very actively. 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. A lot of important work has gone on through that period, not least our work to roll out connectivity across Scotland, without which no access to digital services is possible.

Supporting people who are affected because they do not have access to devices or because they need skills are areas in which we are actively working with the third sector, our colleagues in local government and the private sector, to establish the best and most sustainable way of making that impact in the new normal.

**The Convener:** You described Covid-19 as a “shock to the system”. As I read the Auditor General and Accounts Commission report, it says that Covid-19 was a shock to the system that jolted the Government into action and to take steps to try to tackle digital exclusion. However, since the pandemic, those efforts seem to have lost momentum and slowed down and, in the words of the Auditor General, “leadership ... has weakened”.

**Lesley Fraser:** I do not think that I would accept that. I will maybe bring—

**The Convener:** I am sorry, but I thought that you said earlier that you accept the recommendations and findings.

**Lesley Fraser:** We accept the recommendations and the general points that the Auditor General has helpfully made. There are aspects that are quite complex to design in a sustainable and citizen-centred way at this point, but there has been a real focus on getting the foundations right. I will ask Geoff Huggins to say a bit about the work on digital connectivity that has been going on, for example, which has been an absolute priority and an area where we have made real strides through and since the pandemic.

In some of the other areas, we are working with partners to establish how the approach can be sustainable and how, collectively, we can make the biggest impact in areas where we need to work with citizens and communities to tackle issues such as access to affordable tariffs and to devices and, in some instances, to skills.

Geoff, do you want to say something about the work that we have done on connectivity?

**Geoff Huggins (Scottish Government):** I will maybe just pick up on some of the change that the programme has gone through. During the Covid period, our response to digital inclusion was quite narrow. In effect, we gave people devices and connections—we issued those—and that was very much led from within the then digital directorate. The Auditor General’s report identifies the need for the approach to digital inclusion to be considerably broader. The issue needs to be everybody’s business. It needs to be about how we design and

deliver services and how we develop a broader skills agenda that is not just for the 60,000 people who were given devices. That is considerably more complex and involved than simply going through a procurement and then issuing devices through voluntary sector organisations.

Since the Covid pandemic, we have seen a change in how the programme is put together. We have begun to address those issues and to think about how we reach out and engage properly with health, how we work with social security and how we work across sectors as part of the child poverty agenda. It is about how we weave this into how we think about public services, so that it is not just about digital inclusion or digital device management. That is the change that we have been going through. The digital inclusion alliance and the work that has been done by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and local government are all leaning into that very different sort of agenda, which is not simply about saying to people, “Can we give you a device?”

Although we accept the generality, we have gone through quite a difficult change process, in resetting expectations as to how the programme works and what that means for our colleagues across Government and the public sector.

**The Convener:** Let us not deal with generalities, then; let us deal with specifics. In paragraphs 35 and 36 of the report—I remind you that it was published just in August of this year, so it is quite recent—it says:

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

It continues:

“The Scottish Government and COSLA joint strategy lacks a delivery plan that sets out the detailed actions that are needed, who is responsible for them, and timescales or monitoring arrangements.”

How do you respond to that?

**Lesley Fraser:** That is about the work that Geoff Huggins has set out that is under way—

**The Convener:** So do you now have detailed actions? Have you designated who is responsible for them? Do you have timescales and monitoring arrangements?

**Geoff Huggins:** The work that we are currently doing with local government colleagues and with colleagues across the Scottish Government and the wider public sector is about how we refresh the 2021 strategy, which set out a broad range of objectives in respect of digital.

My reading of the situation is that the strategy could have been more developed in terms of who was responsible for the different actions. In practical terms, the majority of the actions have

fallen to the digital directorate, which does not really reflect the complexity of the digital environment. The work that we have been doing with minister Ivan McKee and colleagues in COSLA, which we will discuss in a couple of weeks' time at the joint leadership board with Mr McKee and Councillor Hagmann, focuses on how we can produce more of an overarching strategy, supported by very clear action plans, including sectoral action plans in areas such as health and education, which produce detailed commitments in those areas.

**The Convener:** Within the first 10 minutes of the meeting, we have already been told a few times that this is complicated, but some of these things are quite simple. Paragraph 37 of the report that we are discussing notes that

"Meetings of key governance groups have been infrequent."

What is the explanation for that?

**Geoff Huggins:** The programme board has met probably three times a year, which is fairly standard for a programme board, looking over a process. It has been supported by working groups and by action outside the programme board. Similarly, the joint leadership board that I referred to identified four priorities that it has been working on. The committee will be aware that we have gone through a series of changes of minister, so various meetings have been rescheduled. As I said, we are meeting again in two weeks, when we will consider this report, which is about one of the four priorities of the leadership group. Those four priorities are common components, digital inclusion, connectivity and skills—predominantly public sector workforce skills. Those areas have been in focus as the highest priorities for the leadership group.

**The Convener:** I want to clarify that. The report came out in August, it will be November tomorrow, and the group has not met to discuss the report that you are giving evidence on this morning.

**Geoff Huggins:** Originally, the plan was to be published in July—

**The Convener:** It was postponed because of the election.

**Geoff Huggins:** Yes. At that point, we had a meeting in place that would have happened either just ahead or just beyond the publication of the report. However, because of the election, we lost that meeting. Because of the challenges of scheduling, diaries and so on, we have scheduled the meeting for November.

**The Convener:** Okay. Mr Wallace, does COSLA accept the findings and recommendations in this report?

**Martyn Wallace (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities):** Yes, absolutely, 100 per cent, because digital services are the way to go—being a digital nation—especially with the other goals and priorities that we and the Scottish Government have for the citizens of Scotland.

**The Convener:** Martyn Wallace, do you accept the finding in the joint report from the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General that

"the Local Government Digital Office, the delivery body for the Local Government Digital Partnership, does not include tackling digital exclusion as part of its work programme"?

**Martyn Wallace:** Tackling the issue of digital inclusion is included under service design and capability and capacity building. The challenge has been to get resources in place to support that work, due to the digital office's small budget.

**The Convener:** Are you saying that you accept that finding or that you do not accept it?

**Martyn Wallace:** I do not necessarily accept the finding. We have instances of doing stuff around service design to look at inclusion in the way in which we manage and create services in local government, so I do not accept that finding to the full extent.

**The Convener:** Okay. One of the recommendations is that councils

"should map out local resources and assets across the public, private and third sectors, and provide clear routes to digital support and accessible information".

Does COSLA accept that recommendation? Are individual local authorities pursuing that?

**Martyn Wallace:** We accept the recommendation and we have been doing that in conjunction with the Scottish Government for a while.

**The Convener:** If I were to go to a local authority in the area that I represent, would I find that it had already mapped local resources and produced an overview of the third, public and private sectors?

**Martyn Wallace:** I am sorry that I do not know what area you represent, but I would expect so, yes.

**The Convener:** Is each of the 32 local authorities in Scotland carrying out that recommendation and doing that mapping work?

**Martyn Wallace:** On the back of this report, the mapping work was accelerated, so I expect that that will have been done by now.

09:15

**The Convener:** Before I bring in the deputy convener, I will go back to Lesley Fraser. Lesley, the section in the report on building digital

inclusion considerations into strategies and design for digital services says that all public bodies should

“carry out equality and human rights impact assessments”.

Do you accept that recommendation?

**Lesley Fraser:** We accept that public bodies should follow the requirement to undertake assessments. They are required to do that by law, and it is critically important that they do. Equalities impact assessments on digital accessibility are significant and important. The design standards that Martyn Wallace referred to are an important way in which we can practically underpin those and give colleagues across the public sector guidance about the best way to carry them out.

**The Convener:** Have you issued guidance to health boards, Scottish Enterprise and all the other public bodies that you have oversight of?

**Lesley Fraser:** The design standard is readily available for all public bodies to draw from.

**Geoff Huggins:** The digital Scotland service standard applies to all Scottish Government and public body projects that fall within the technology assurance framework. It is a requirement that they all comply with the standard. In effect, there is a mandatory requirement for all projects that are included in the report that we issue to the committee to comply. Probably about 80 per cent of the projects are included in that report.

The NHS has separate arrangements, within which it is also committed to the service design standard. Therefore, we expect it to follow the standard as well. It is quite onerous in its focus on usability, accessibility and equalities. Understanding the service from the perspective of various users is built into the process.

We deliberately leaned into that as we developed the next stage of the connecting Scotland programme. If a body is offering a service through a digital channel, it needs to assure itself that, although it is offering the service through a digital channel and people are able to access it in that way, solving the problem does not become a challenge only for the digital directorate. In each case—if it is digital front door or how people learn—it is the public body that is responsible for delivering the service that needs to be accountable for that.

**The Convener:** Can I go back to the report? It identifies an insufficiency when it comes to carrying out equalities and human rights impact assessments. It says that there should be more of them and that it should be systematic. It does not appear to be systematic, so are you, as the Scottish Government, providing any leadership to public bodies on that? I am not asking whether you are telling bodies generally that they ought to

do those assessments—are you driving it and embedding it in the digital strategies that have been adopted by public bodies across Scotland?

**Geoff Huggins:** I am not sure that I agree with that. The assurance framework that we apply to the delivery of digital services makes clear that doing the assessments is a requirement, and that it is a necessary step to take a project through the various required gateways to receive sign-off and funding. I do not agree that we do not do that. We do not do that as an external, explicit, separate process, but that is because we build it into the service development and the design phase of services.

**The Convener:** Sorry—and this will be my final question—but are you saying that, if we were to send freedom of information requests to public bodies in Scotland or write to them as the Public Audit Committee of the Scottish Parliament to ask them to send us their equality and human rights impact assessment regarding their digital strategies or the roll-out of digitalisation in areas of public service delivery, they would be able to send them back?

**Geoff Huggins:** I expect that they would send you back the equalities impact assessments that they have done in respect of their service. They would not send them for only the digital component of their service, because, alongside digital channels, we make it a requirement that people are also able to access services in a non-digital way, should they choose to do so. We have to look at the totality of the service—not one component of it—to understand the degree to which the service meets equalities requirements. My expectation is that that is what you would get, and the requirement that we operate under is that, if a body offers something through a digital channel, it also has to be available through a non-digital channel. That means that EQIAs have to address the totality of the service, not just a component of a service.

**The Convener:** Okay. Other committee members want to come in, so I will bring in Graham Simpson for one quick question before I turn to the deputy convener.

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** It is just to clear up some confusion for me. Lesley Fraser, you said right at the start, in response to the convener, that you accepted all the recommendations in the report, but Mr Huggins said that there had been no meeting to discuss it—well, that is what he said.

Has there been a meeting to discuss it or not?

**Geoff Huggins:** Just to be clear, we have been meeting fairly regularly—we also met with the team who produced the report. Over the summer, we acted on the information that we were aware



was going to come as part of the report. We have not had a meeting of the joint ministerial and COSLA group since the report's publication, and that will take place, but we have been meeting fairly actively in respect of the report.

**Graham Simpson:** Has the report been discussed? If so, by who?

**Geoff Huggins:** The report has been discussed by senior officials; it has been briefed on and set out for ministers, and they understand its contents.

We had been planning and preparing for publication in July, and we were ready for that, having considered what our response to it would have been at that stage. It is not that we have been waiting for today to consider what we think of the report—we have been pretty busy.

**Graham Simpson:** I want to get to the nub of this. Who is it that has met to decide that you agree with the recommendations in the report?

**Geoff Huggins:** It is on behalf of ministers. We have met with ministers and discussed the report with ministers. There is a further discussion about next steps and actions that will come out of the joint board in two weeks' time; it will effectively set the agenda for the next six months for the joint work between COSLA and the Scottish Government, on the basis of our acceptance of the report.

**The Convener:** I will bring in the deputy convener, Jamie Greene.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** Good morning. I have to say that I found the report rather depressing in its content, as it is undoubtedly critical of the progress, or lack thereof, on addressing digital exclusion. I say that I am depressed because, when I joined the Parliament eight years ago, the very first portfolio that I was appointed to was shadow digital minister, which I found quite amusing, because there was no digital minister to shadow. I do not know whether my former leader was just keeping me busy and out of trouble.

The point is that, at that point, I felt that there should be a digital minister—the Government should have had someone who was dedicated to tackling digital exclusion, and addressing issues such as connectivity and enhancing the skills of the general populace.

We are now some eight years on, and I do not think that the content of the report reflects sufficient progress, notwithstanding some of the issues that we went through during the Covid period.

I draw your attention to paragraph 42. I have given what is perhaps a subjective view from an individual member of this Parliament, but the

Auditor General for Scotland is clear himself when he says:

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

It is there in the report, in black and white. That was just a few months ago. Was the Auditor General right or wrong?

**Geoff Huggins:** The report helpfully sets out the different components of digital exclusion. It identifies the connectivity agenda under which we have very clear Scottish Government-wide commitments on access to both broadband and 4G, so in that area, we have very clear commitments.

Beyond that, we have the expectations with regard to the design and delivery of public services and digital channels. I would agree that, at this stage, we do not have commitments in that area that are equivalent to those of other jurisdictions such as Singapore or the leading countries in the world in this area, but we are heading in that direction.

In terms of digital skills, we can track general digital literacy in the population, and we are aware that it is at, or above, the level for the rest of the UK. I think we can approach the agenda only by not seeing it as a single thing called digital inclusion, but by understanding the component elements and ensuring that we are addressing them all.

As I said to the convener, the challenge is of moving from a programme that simply gives devices to people to addressing the causes and the interactions that are in place. That is significantly more challenging. We have tangible commitments in place for aspects of the agenda, but not all, as you say.

**Jamie Greene:** Is that not reflective of the problem itself? I see some good work being done. You have talked about some of the technical connectivity that is going on. These are long-term projects—I remember talking about the R100 project nearly a decade ago, but that work has yet to be completed. The heavy lifting and much of the investment have been done by the private sector. There is limited intervention from Government in that respect.

**Geoff Huggins:** Well, £600 million is quite a major investment.

**Jamie Greene:** Over 10 years?

**Geoff Huggins:** It is £600 million over seven years. Since 2017, we have seen 55 4Gi masts and 16 undersea cables. There has been significant roll-out to the point at which 99 per cent

of all households have 4G available in the household, 95 per cent of all properties have a superfast broadband connection and 73 per cent have a gigabyte broadband connection. Under R100, we decided to invest in gigabyte at the outset; we did not wait for the later programmes that have come along since from the UK Government.

We have made major changes and, within our budget, £600 million is not a small amount of money.

**Jamie Greene:** Why do one in 10 households in Scotland still have no access to the internet?

**Geoff Huggins:** I am sorry, but 95 per cent of all households have direct access through superfast broadband, and 99 per cent have access through 4G, or can have access to 4G. Vouchers are available for houses that do not have connectivity through broadband, and we have been exploring things such as low-earth orbit satellites. We will achieve our targets.

We are also working very closely with the UK Government on the roll-out of the UK-wide project gigabit. You will have seen that we issued the tenders for the first lots of that work in the south of Scotland earlier in the year, and further lots are coming later in the year.

This is a major success story of significant infrastructure investment that has had to go through quite a lot of challenges. You will recall that, two to three years ago, we were faced with significant inflation in the cost of materials and we had workforce challenges. We have managed the contracts aggressively to ensure that the work is delivered for the people of Scotland.

**Jamie Greene:** There might be some disparity in the figures. I am just quoting from the Auditor General's report, which quotes directly from the Scottish Government's figures. The Scottish household survey was last published on 23 December. I appreciate that another one is probably coming out soon, and it may show that that figure of 91 per cent has gone up; I hope that it does.

Notwithstanding that, having technical access is not the same as having the knowledge to use what you can access. It remains a fact that 15 per cent of our population lack basic foundation digital skills. The number of people who have the skills to use high-speed internet is disproportionate, relative to the number of people who can access high-speed internet. What work are you doing to benchmark that against other parts of the UK or countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development region of which we are a part?

**Geoff Huggins:** The 15 per cent figure comes from a UK-wide survey, which identified that Scotland was sitting at around 85 per cent. Those people who do not have the necessary skills predominantly tend to be older people and, in particular, the more disadvantaged. We see projects such as the Digital Lifelines Scotland work by our health colleagues as being pertinent in reaching those spaces.

The figure for the rest of the UK is 84 per cent. All modern nations are going through the problem of having to upskill the population. As I said, the group that has fewer skills tends to be the older population. There is a question as to whether, over time, the problem will continue to diminish.

**Jamie Greene:** Exhibit 2 in the report that we are discussing today talks about digital exclusion and people's human rights. In fact, the overall report took a human rights-based approach; Audit Scotland made that clear early on in the report. That is a good angle to take, because people's human rights are important.

The report identifies a number of specific human rights that could be affected by a lack of access to digital services. They include the rights to receive and impart information, the right to protection from discrimination, and the rights to access education, social security and so on. What analysis has been undertaken of the potential risk of the Scottish Government breaching human rights with respect to digital exclusion? Are there any live cases in the system that reflect such a breach?

09:30

**Geoff Huggins:** I will bring Eilidh McLaughlin in a second to talk about the minimum digital living standard, which is very much in that space. I am not aware of any such live cases in the system. In general, human rights relate to access to and availability of services, and within that, digital is generally a channel by which people access those services. That goes back to my earlier comment that the requirement that we believe sits on us is to provide digital and non-digital channels. Therefore, we would consider the application of rights within that generally, rather than a right to a service through a particular channel. That is how we would understand the issue.

I will bring in Eilidh to talk about the work that we are doing in the area with the University of Liverpool and others, and about learning from the Welsh Government.

**Eilidh McLaughlin (Scottish Government):** The minimum digital living standard is a fairly new concept. It was developed by the universities of Liverpool and Loughborough. The standard that is available at the moment is a UK-level standard. It relates to households with children, which is

particularly pertinent when we consider family groups affected by child poverty.

We considered what the Welsh Government was doing in this space. It did additional research to understand any particular Welsh aspects that the minimum digital living standard could address, and we determined that that would be a really interesting and important exercise to carry out in a Scottish context, mostly because it would underpin some of the considerations that we are already aware of, particularly in relation to rural and remote access.

The minimum digital living standard is in four sections, covering connectivity, devices, skills and cyber. It looks at connectivity in terms of not only download speed but availability. It does not necessarily look at connectivity from a social tariff point of view, but it is very clear that a household with a couple of children will need X number of gigabytes and a fast speed because it will have more streaming requirements than other households. The standard gets into the nitty-gritty of what connectivity people might need, and that is replicated across the four sections.

The standard is important because if we have one in a Scottish context, we can align it with the Scottish service design principles that we have discussed—it can be built into those. That also allows us as Government, and our local authority colleagues, to use it as a baseline to help with the data that we, and they, may have on our populations, to understand where the population is and target help appropriately.

**Jamie Greene:** I am glad that you raised education. The Scottish Government famously made a commitment to distribute free digital devices such as laptops, tablets and so on to schoolchildren. Was that successful and 100 per cent delivered?

**Lesley Fraser:** From memory, I think that around 70,000 devices were provided. It was critically important that young people could get access to online education when Covid was such a feature of our lives. That was an enormous collective effort, and it was successful at the time.

**Jamie Greene:** To put that into context, what proportion is 70,000 of the amount that could or should have been distributed? It sounds a lot, but it could mean nothing.

**Geoff Huggins:** Martyn Wallace may want to come in on this as well. A number of councils took that approach and distributed educational devices pretty much universally across their areas. Other councils have taken different approaches to how they take forward learning. There was a commitment by the Scottish Government to invest directly in those councils, but in the context of the challenging funding situation, that did not go

forward. We are currently working with education colleagues in respect of a potential investment of £10 million for 2025-26, which the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills announced, on the basis of a targeted scheme to identify where that money could best be used.

Again, we will need to take that forward with colleagues in COSLA under the Verity house agreement, because it reaches into a space that is a local government responsibility.

**Jamie Greene:** That demonstrates my point. You want to tackle digital exclusion and improve access, and you made a commitment to distribute devices, which is a key component, but you failed to do so. Is that not why reports such as the one that we are considering are so critical of progress? Perhaps that is for you, Ms Fraser, as you are in charge of this.

**Lesley Fraser:** As Geoff Huggins said, it was critically important that we got devices to people at that point during Covid. However, as the report sets out really well, the issues of digital exclusion are multifaceted and, with our partners, we are now taking a multifaceted approach to tackle the issue in a sustainable way for the future. The devices issue is one component of that, but it cannot be seen in isolation.

**Jamie Greene:** The Scottish Government was keen to ensure that the rights of children were incorporated and enshrined in law in Scotland. Are any of the articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child currently being breached as a result of digital exclusion? For example, I point to articles 13, 17 and 26, which are specifically related to access to information, social security and so on. There is also article 45, which says that Governments must consult the United Nations Children Fund—UNICEF—on their policies with regard to the rights of children. Has consultation taken place, or has the Scottish Government worked with UNICEF on the roll-out of policies to tackle digital exclusion among children?

**Lesley Fraser:** As Geoff Huggins said, the important aspect is that people can access the service through a channel that works for them. That might be a digital route, or it might be through face-to-face services or other routes. The design standards, which are based on an equalities and rights-based approach, ensure that the different channels are available. That is the critically important point.

I am not aware of whether work has been undertaken in the specific area that you mention.

**Geoff Huggins:** It has not, but the Scottish Government contributes to the UK-wide report on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which I think might be biannual rather than annual. As part

of that, we are required to assure ourselves that we are meeting the obligations that sit at Scottish Government level in that respect.

It comes back to the discussion on whether there is a right to a particular channel of access, or whether it is about the generality of the right to the service. In exhibit 2, the example of non-access to a service that is offered relates to universal credit, which is a UK Government benefit rather than a Scottish Government one. Social Security Scotland has done extensive work to ensure that people who do not have digital access can fully engage with and access benefits within Scotland.

Some countries across the world—we are doing quite a lot of work with colleagues from Denmark at the moment—have made it pretty close to mandatory for people to access services through a digital channel, and that brings with it additional obligations and responsibilities. It is where those countries are on their digital journey that makes it possible for them to do that. Where we are in Scotland is that we continue to work on the basis that the individual has a degree of choice, and that services, as they continue to develop, will continue to be multichannel, whether that is telephone, in-person appointment or digital. That is where the particular human rights aspect becomes significant. It applies at the level of access to service and not at the level of access to channel.

**Jamie Greene:** Others will ask about access to local services, particularly through local authorities, and some of the difficulties that people face. You have talked about Denmark, Singapore and other countries. Is anyone at any point a little bit embarrassed by the lack of progress in Scotland? Do you not feel that, as a nation, we should be leading the way and not chasing?

**Geoff Huggins:** There is an annual survey of digital progress across advanced nations, and the UK, of which Scotland is part, generally comes in the top 10. We are not a poorly performing nation in respect of digital services; we perform well. We are not at the top of the league—that is clear—but we are making good progress. We are happy to talk to the committee at a future date about our progress on digital services more generally.

**Jamie Greene:** I will maybe come back in later, convener.

**The Convener:** Mr Huggins, you spoke earlier about “a major success story” but, on the subject of digital exclusion, I infer from what you said that you think that it is the ageing population that is digitally excluded and that, over time, that will diminish, as though you think that people are going to die off and the problem will go away. However, that is not what the report says, is it? It says that age is a factor—of course it is, and

everybody understands that—but the introduction to the report says:

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

My question is for the director general. What is the Scottish Government’s position? Is it that you think that the problem will diminish over time because older people are going to die, or do you see that there is a real and present issue because of people’s impoverishment and protected characteristics, which will continue to exist and to be a challenge, and on which the Government needs to show some leadership?

**Lesley Fraser:** The basis on which the 2021 digital strategy was developed is that digital exclusion involves a complex set of issues. There is, absolutely, a factor of poverty and inequality, there is a factor of geographic access, and there is a factor of skills and of having well-designed public services. We take those issues seriously. That is why the thrust of the report is very welcome, and it aligns absolutely with the work that we are doing with our partners to address the situation through a multifaceted approach, as Geoff Huggins said. As Geoff acknowledged, poverty and inequality are critical components of that, which is why we very much align our work with, for example, the Government’s broader work on tackling poverty, and particularly child poverty. It is a multifaceted set of issues and we need to take action across those areas.

**The Convener:** Okay—thank you. I will bring in Colin Beattie next.

**Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** Pre-Covid, I had a meeting with Ofcom, which helpfully produced some statistics on my constituency. The figures for the Midlothian part of my constituency were quite a shocker—at that time, 34 per cent of the adult population had no access to a smartphone or to the internet. I am sure that Covid drove huge changes in relation to that and I have not seen an up-to-date figure. Nevertheless, even if that figure has gone down by two thirds—I use that as a notional figure—it is still a significant issue.

There is an assumption that people are digitally excluded due to age or infirmity or whatever although, just from my point of view, I would want to hit back on that. However, what I am trying to find out is the extent to which we have an analysis of the different sectors and categories—or however you want to put it—of people who are digitally excluded. I have met a surprising number of people who do not want a smartphone, the internet or any of the social media contacts. That means that they are almost off-grid, and their ability to access services is fairly limited. You could say that that is by choice in their cases but,

as you know, there are many other categories of people for whom that is not by choice. How do you analyse that? How do you get the breakdown of who cannot access digital services?

**Lesley Fraser:** That is really important. Eilidh McLaughlin referred to the work on the minimum digital living standard and how that looks across Scotland, which will be really important in building our knowledge here.

Tariffs, including social tariffs, are regulated by Ofcom at the UK level, but we work closely with UK colleagues. I will bring in Eilidh McLaughlin to talk a bit more about the work that we have been doing to address that set of issues.

09:45

**Eilidh McLaughlin:** As Geoff Huggins has mentioned, a lot of the surveys that are done at the moment are at the UK level. If we drill down into, for example, the Lloyds Bank survey that is done every year on that issue, we find that the population that is surveyed in Scotland is relatively small, so we are extrapolating larger numbers from quite a small survey.

It is quite complex to get a handle on the exact data on who is and is not excluded. There are many reasons for that. For example, as Colin Beattie mentioned, some people choose not to be online, but you will not necessarily understand their reasoning and motivation by simply asking whether they are online, because you will get a black-and-white answer of yes or no.

Over the past couple of years, circumstances have changed a lot as a result of the cost of living crisis, which has driven people to behave differently in choosing how they spend their money. As a result, there is flux among the population in relation to those who are online and those who choose not to be, depending on their financial circumstances, for example.

As well as taking forward the minimum digital living standard, the connecting Scotland team is looking to commission data work in Scotland so that we understand the available data sets. For example, in relation to the uptake of connectivity, how does the Scottish index of multiple deprivation compare with data on the R100 programme? What picture does that paint? That information will allow us to understand which populations are more in need of help and to target support using, for example, the minimum digital living standard.

**Colin Beattie:** How do you support people who choose not to adopt such services? Do they have no freedom of choice at all, and must they simply comply, as is the case with some of the services that councils and the Government offer?

**Eilidh McLaughlin:** As Geoff Huggins has mentioned, we are still required to provide access to services through means other than digital. Whether those means are publicised and people know about them is a different question—potentially not one that we are here to answer—but people require other routes to services.

Mr Wallace can talk about the local authority position on council services.

**Martyn Wallace:** Local government has to cater for every citizen in Scotland. There is a means of accessing services, even if they are online, through contact centres or help desks in offices, but there is a challenge around keeping the lights on in those facilities with limited budgets. In some areas, analysis is being done on the best place to have help centres where people who do not have digital access can pitch up to access services.

**Colin Beattie:** Eilidh McLaughlin, you talked about possibly having a consultation that would provide more detail on the different categories of people who do not have digital access—at least, that is how I interpreted what you said.

**Eilidh McLaughlin:** It will not necessarily be a consultation, because it can sometimes be quite difficult to get responses from people who are in most need, but we work with third sector partners, local authorities and the Improvement Service to understand the landscape around who is being helped and why.

On your point about choice, one of the issues that we have as a digital society is that driving the provision of digital services is not solely a Government issue; the private sector has a role to play, too. That is one of the reasons why the digital inclusion alliance is pulling together the third, public and private sectors in this space; there is a recognition that we all have a part to play in ensuring appropriate access to services.

**Colin Beattie:** When you mentioned the private sector, utility companies immediately came to mind—their digital services are almost impenetrable, so I can understand why people throw their hands up and decide to go off-grid.

Nevertheless, there is still the issue that, broadly, we do not know which people are not accessing digital services. We assume that that group includes older people, people who do not access services through choice and people who do not access services due to poverty or a lack of means. There could be other categories of people, including those who do not access digital services due to disabilities and all sorts of things. However, we do not know or even have an estimate of how big those populations are and there does not seem to be a plan to reach them.

**Geoff Huggins:** There are a couple of things to say on that. We know exactly which properties in Scotland have a good broadband connection—

**Colin Beattie:** So you have all the statistics.

**Geoff Huggins:** We have that data and there is a search facility, so you can look up that information for your address—

**Colin Beattie:** Broadband is only part of the issue.

**Geoff Huggins:** Yes, but the availability of that service is the first stage. Then there is the question of whether somebody actually takes up a contract with a provider. When we were doing the R100 contracts, there was a presumption that, in an area that had been given a broadband connection, about 70 per cent of people would take up a contract. However, that estimate has been significantly exceeded and more people have taken up the connection than was anticipated as part of the contract. That is good, because it means that we get money back, which, in effect, gives us back resource that we can use for other purposes.

Beyond that, we have better and improving information around skills. However, one of the big drivers is going to be the quality of public and private sector services. People adopt a technology because it helps them to do something that they want to do in a way that works for them. That is why a lot of our focus is on quality and ease of use. That takes us into the area of how people are able to use their identity online and how they are able to do things such as store their credentials so that they do not have to refill forms and so on. The big agenda is to make the prize such that people want to gain the skills, have the connection and use the service. Historically, that area has been underplayed with regard to this agenda. A lot of people do not engage digitally because it is really hard work. Our job is to change that and to make it easier than doing things any other way so that people use digital services on that basis.

We are able to carve up various aspects of the situation. As you say, we do not have the complete story of exactly who does not have access and for what reason, because there will be different reasons for different people, but we are getting closer to that every year. It is not just about older people; it is also about connectivity and skills. Each of the different agendas is eating away at the number of digitally excluded people. It is a complex story, as we have agreed.

Over the past three or four years, the experience of connectivity across the islands has been transformational. Ministers come back from summer tours and tell me that the 4G connection was better on Stornoway than it is in the centre of Edinburgh and that in some areas it was easier to

do their work than they would ever have thought would be the case. The agenda is very much to play all these games to get to the point at which we achieve the objective, which is a fully included population.

**Colin Beattie:** You touched on the interesting point that digital services can be complicated. I am thinking about the number of apps that I have on my phone because everybody insists that you download an app before you can do anything. It is a major task in the beginning just to find the app that you need so that you can get into whatever system you are trying to access, so I can understand why a lot of people choose not to participate.

**Geoff Huggins:** Ease of use is a key issue. We all have experience of having to download something, whether that is because we need to park a car, get access to a particular venue or buy something online. At that point, it becomes a question of the ease of use and channel. Government services need to be in that space, too. They need to be the thing that you want to have, because it will make your life easier.

**Colin Beattie:** I come back to the wider issue of the lack of progress on tackling digital exclusion. What has been the impact of the joint national strategy, “A Changing Nation: How Scotland will Thrive in a Digital World”, and the aim of ensuring that nobody was left behind? The digital participation charter is being measured. How is it being used to inform the refreshed strategy that you are talking about?

**Geoff Huggins:** In May this year, we published a report on the 2021 strategy, which sets out the main areas in which we have made progress. We have covered a good deal of that already in speaking about the connectivity agenda. Over the past six or seven years, we have moved from about 73 per cent to 99 per cent for 4G coverage at the household level. There is good improvement there.

Similarly, there is the digital academy and skills agenda, which is predominantly for the public sector workforce. We understand the need to do significant work going forward, in central and local government and across public bodies. There has been lot of progress.

We have also had programmes on identity, payments and the adoption of cloud technology, which we have spoken to the committee about before. All those are now delivered and running as live services. Three years ago, none of those were live services, so there has been significant change. Elements of that relate to the inclusion agenda and probably address some aspects of digital inclusion.

Alongside the Audit Scotland report that we are looking at, in a couple of weeks' time, we will set out the arrangements for how we take forward publication of an updated strategy in 2025 in a way that is perhaps more encompassing across Government. One criticism that might be made of the 2021 strategy is that, although it is a Government strategy, it seems to be largely about what the digital directorate does. The 2025 strategy will be overarching and will cover all Government and local government, but with the expectation that we will then see documents below that to cover particular topic areas such as health and care, education and enterprise. I would expect there to be a topic-specific action plan that sits underneath that in respect of digital inclusion.

Ivan McKee has written to the Cabinet and his ministerial colleagues to set out the proposal. That approach allows us to knit together the work across Government and to make it a lot more tangible. I would agree with the committee that, next time round, the strategy needs to be better supported by clear action plans and timed deliverables. That is my objective. It makes it easy for me to understand what I need to do and what other people need to do.

**Colin Beattie:** There seem to be a lot of strategies. What progress has been made in delivering the ambitions of the joint national strategy since the initial connecting Scotland programme was delivered? In particular, what is the role of the digital citizen unit in delivery of the new connecting Scotland programme, the digital inclusion alliance and the collaborative work between Government and other sectors?

**Geoff Huggins:** I will pass that to Eilidh McLaughlin. Before I do so, I point out that one of the explicit recommendations that Audit Scotland has made to us is that there is a need to refresh the strategy. There was a question for us as to whether we need to focus more on an action plan, but we are happy to accept that recommendation and prepare a new strategy document. That is a clear recommendation in the report.

Eilidh, do you want to say a bit more about the digital citizen division and what it does more generally?

**Eilidh McLaughlin:** The digital citizen division, as you might expect, covers much more than just the connecting Scotland programme. We also cover digital ethics, data ethics and unlocking the value of data, as well as the Scottish Government's records management, data protection and library services. It is quite wide ranging. The fundamental piece that joins together all those areas is trust—it is all about trust in the information and what we do with it, and making sure that people have access to that information.

The part of the digital citizen division that we are interested in today is the connecting Scotland programme. I am glad that the question about progress has come up, as I wanted to address that. I joined the programme in April 2022, at which point it was changing from a pandemic programme to what we see today. It took time—it always takes time, as Geoff Huggins mentioned—to come into the area, to understand what was happening and to build trust with the partners and ensure that they came on the journey with us.

We have done a lot of work in the intervening two and a little bit years since I came into post. We have not only produced a full business case for the direction of connecting Scotland but supported people in offboarding from the original connecting Scotland programme while giving them continued connectivity to make sure that there was no cliff edge. That took quite a lot of design. We wanted to ensure that the process was user led and adhered to the principles that we have talked about of providing a positive service design experience for the people who had already benefited from connecting Scotland.

Last April, we ran a British-Irish Council event that included all Administrations and nations of the United Kingdom. We had an exceptionally successful event with 150 delegates from all corners of the UK, who came to Edinburgh to discuss that very issue. We brought the digital inclusion alliance into play, and we have been working with the short-life working group on that, as well as working on the minimum digital living standard. On top of that, we have still been grant funding, on a one-to-many basis, programmes that are beginning to show evidence of real impact for users.

10:00

Therefore, we have not been standing still by any means. I accept that the work does not look as fast paced as it was during the pandemic, but I remind the committee that the pandemic was a particular time. We were all working at a fast pace for very particular reasons, and that could not be sustained either financially or in terms of the welfare of the people involved in delivering that programme.

**Graham Simpson:** We are talking about digital exclusion. I have to say that Mr Beattie sounds digitally frustrated, and who can blame him?

Ahead of this evidence session, I was thinking about the interaction that I, as a citizen, have with Government. I can think of things for which I use the UK Government website, such as paying for car tax, checking my MOT and applying for a new passport—my wife recently did that and the process was very efficient. You can do your tax

return online and things like that. Then I thought about the Scottish Government, and, to be honest, I am struggling to think of things on which I, as a citizen, would interact with the Scottish Government website. I really want some help here. Perhaps you could give me some examples of where members of the public would use the Scottish Government website.

**Lesley Fraser:** I will start with Social Security Scotland, because it is one of the biggest new public services in the country, which provides benefits to around a quarter of the population. The choice of different channels speaks exactly to the approach that we have been setting out. We are seeing large numbers of people choosing to claim benefits online. For example, more than 95 per cent of people who claim the young carer grant choose to do that online.

We are also seeing very positive feedback, with people saying that they have a good or very good experience. Therefore, we hope that the service has been well designed and thought through from the perspective of the citizen, which drives people to use a well-designed service and means that they do not experience the frustration that Mr Beattie set out. We are certainly seeing that with Social Security Scotland. If you choose not to use digital services, there is a wide range of routes, in conjunction with local advisers, the third sector and local government, that can help people in other ways to access their entitlement.

There are also some examples of in the area of health, with digital services for people who need access to mental health support, which is a really interesting and important area. In addition, the Digital Lifelines Scotland project is giving people access to advice and support and helping to tackle drug issues and drug deaths. We are seeing real innovation in a number of public services, using our design standards, and really putting the citizen at the heart of those services. That is on a wraparound basis; clearly, digital is one channel, but it is supported by other channels.

**Geoff Huggins:** I can provide a few other examples of areas where you might come across a digital channel. If you apply for a disclosure certificate, which is issued by Disclosure Scotland, that will now be issued electronically rather than as a piece of paper that comes in the post. That uses the ScotAccount work that we have done with Disclosure Scotland.

Similarly, a number of the services with which people interact are in both the public and private sectors, and even if individuals are not going through digital channels, those sectors will be. For example, when someone is buying or selling a house, the work that is done with registers sits in a digital channel. Similarly, people who have a septic tank or something like that in their back

garden will engage in that way with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency.

We are working with Food Standards Scotland on the licensing and regulatory regime for commercial and industrial premises in relation to food and environmental health. We are doing work on student awards, which might not directly affect you, but it might affect people you know. There is also the Government's legislation on burials and cremations.

There are a number of areas, so the agenda is really quite broad. Over the next three or four years, you will probably see the work that we are doing with NHS Lanarkshire to create a new digital channel for medical appointment letters, as the first part of its work to create a digital front door. We are looking beyond simply the letter and thinking about what other information should be wrapped around it to make an appointment more likely to be successful the first time. That is coming out of the work that we have been doing on the cloud, payments and identity over the past three or four years. That general infrastructure can then begin to be used across a range of services.

You might not see them directly yourself, but, during the day, you will almost certainly talk to somebody who is using one of our digital channels or shopping in a building that is directly connected.

**Graham Simpson:** That is very useful in setting out where members of the public can interact digitally. I am glad that you mentioned the health service, because I wish that there was some digital inclusion in the health service. Generally, we are a bit behind the curve in Scotland. [*Interruption.*] Hang on—I have not finished.

You mentioned work with NHS Lanarkshire. One of the frustrations—certainly for me—is the inability to book a medical appointment or interact with a general practitioner online. Many GPs do not offer that service, so I am interested in what you have to say about NHS Lanarkshire. Will you provide more details of that work?

**Geoff Huggins:** I will say a couple of things. In relation to the NHS, Lesley Fraser has already given the examples of Digital Lifelines Scotland and the mental health work. When it has been decided that a digital channel should be used, there is strong focus on inclusion and ensuring that people can use it.

I think that you are saying that, generally, there is no digital channel to engage with the NHS, but that is a general service issue rather than an inclusion issue.

Any work that we do with health colleagues—including our work with NHS Lanarkshire—is intended to be done in such a way that it is replicable across other health boards, because



there is no value in us doing a bit of work with NHS Lanarkshire unless it offers a solution that can then be used by other health boards and other services.

Our first piece of work is a project called digital mail that we are doing with a Danish company that has done similar work in Denmark, so we are learning from and building on experience elsewhere. That will give us some of the infrastructure that we need more generally, but it will also give us learning. Part of the process of developing and delivering a new service involves getting feedback, understanding people's experience of it and working through problems, including issues relating to accessibility, usability and inclusion. What additional information will that give us? As we roll out the programme further, we will be able to deploy that knowledge more generally.

**Graham Simpson:** Where will we end up in Lanarkshire? I live in Lanarkshire and represent it, as does the convener. You said that the work is to do with medical appointment letters. It surely has to be more than just a letter arriving in someone's inbox.

**Geoff Huggins:** You are right, and digital mail will be more than a letter—it will allow the collection of information ahead of the appointment, which might otherwise have been done at the time of the appointment. It will give additional information about the person, and it will also become the mechanism by which people get the response and the outcome of the appointment.

Generally, in digital, the experience has been that, when you start with the whole story, things go badly wrong. However, when you start with a component of a service and build out from that, things tend to work well. That is a design principle for digital services. You might have the whole objective in view, but starting with a particular use case and building out allows you to proceed with the technical and design development in a way that is more likely to be successful, so that my colleagues and I do not have to come back here to explain why we have made a mess of something.

**Graham Simpson:** Mr Wallace, most people have contact with their councils, and councils are now moving more and more to online services. However, there were some comments in the report that I want to put to you.

Exhibit 2, which the deputy convener referred to earlier, says:

"People find it difficult to apply for council tax reductions, as some councils have moved the application process online."

If people are not online or struggle to use the internet, they find it difficult. The report goes on to say:

"Parents and carers can find it difficult to use digital apps now commonly required to support their child's education."

Paragraph 54 says:

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

and

"cost of living support and guidance."

Do you accept all that?

**Martyn Wallace:** I accept that there is more to be done. We have had a digital identity provider or proposition since 2014 through the Improvement Service, and the myaccount service enables people to access digital services online.

There are still routes for people who do not have the digital means, skills or confidence to get access to stuff offline. From personal experience with my parents, I know how difficult that is. My mum passed away and we had her funeral last week. My dad used the "Tell us once" facility with me on Tuesday night to go through all the stuff that is to go back, including the blue badge. I know at first hand how difficult that can be, but there are still routes to speak to a council on the phone or through a contact centre, or to go into a council building.

Yes—100 per cent—we want people to be more digitally enabled, because it saves costs and time and helps with data, but we cannot marginalise people who do not have online access. Obviously, in order not to contravene human rights, we must give everybody fair access to all the services that we provide.

**Graham Simpson:** I am really sorry for your loss. How did that facility work for you?

**Martyn Wallace:** It was pretty interesting. It was quite easy to do, because we were able to put in all of my mum's details. My dad is 77, and my mum was 72, with complex conditions. My dad was apprehensive about doing it on his own, so he sat down with a family member—the digital person in the room—to help him through it. Within a couple of clicks and about 10 minutes, we had everything done. It was easy to do.

**Graham Simpson:** If you had not been there, would your dad have struggled?

**Martyn Wallace:** He would have struggled. When you register the death, you get access to somebody to do that with you on the phone, or you can do it online, but my dad preferred to do it online, because he has me as an asset.

**Graham Simpson:** Did your parents generally use council services online? I am sorry to keep mentioning your parents—it is just because they are in their 70s.

**Martyn Wallace:** That is fine. They tried to. They used some, but they did not use all of them.

**Graham Simpson:** There were some things that they did not use.

**Martyn Wallace:** There were some things that they did not use. I will put it in context. I think that, more than anything else, from pride, they did not want to upset or annoy somebody, so they would rather speak to somebody face to face.

**Graham Simpson:** My in-laws, who have sadly passed away, were never online. I do not know how they managed, but, somehow, they got by, and there must be a number of people in that position. Mr Beattie mentioned that earlier. People either do not want to be online or just cannot get online. For council services, it is really important that you cater for those people.

10:15

**Martyn Wallace:** Absolutely—100 per cent. There are challenges on post-Covid facilities, costs and so on. We need to look at the best place to put those services for the individual. Mr Beattie's point about finding the individuals who are digitally excluded is a key part of how to better deliver services for those who choose not to go online.

I also want to point out something else from our earlier conversations. Every person in the UK will have a broadband line by January 2027, because the industry is switching off analogue telephone services and moving to digital. We have done a massive piece of work with health and care professionals, the digital health and care directorate in the Scottish Government, the NHS and others to deliver a digital telecare service, which has helped us to understand a lot more about the challenges around accessible tariffs. We have provided guidance through the telecare service providers' networks across Scotland and delivered a cloud solution for us as service providers to get better data to help with better outcomes. The digitally excluded might not necessarily be individuals; they could also be members of staff using digital devices.

Mass connectivity will happen in the next two years across the whole of the UK, not just Scotland. That has to be looked at in terms of the opportunities that that can bring and the challenges that we will face.

**Graham Simpson:** The key thing is that people need to know about it.

**Martyn Wallace:** That is correct.

**Graham Simpson:** I recently got a fibre broadband connection, but that only happened because a bloke turned up in my street and asked me to move my car so that he could get access to a cable for a neighbour. He said, "I just happened to notice that you haven't got a fibre connection", so I got it. It probably needs to be better advertised.

Has COSLA done any kind of audit of what services councils are offering online and what they do for people who cannot get online?

**Martyn Wallace:** Not necessarily COSLA, but the Improvement Service, which is one of the partners in the digital partnership, has done. It has developed an identification solution called myaccount, and has done work to get access to other services on the back of that, such as parentsportal, My Diabetes My Way and NHS 24. The Improvement Service has done a lot of work on the service challenge, and those issues need to be looked at as part of public sector transformation.

**The Convener:** We are about to enter the final stretch of this morning's evidence session. I want to get some clarification on something that came up in the evidence session that we had with the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission. It is on the issue of the blue badge, which is highlighted in the report as being almost emblematic of where there might be an issue around digital exclusion. In answer to a question that I put to the Auditor General, he said:

"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."—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 5 September 2024; c 19.]

One of the three major pillars of the Verity house agreement is about person-centred public services. This is a kind of test of that, is it not? Martyn Wallace, do you want to come back on that?

**Martyn Wallace:** Under the Verity house agreement, another big piece of work is being done between the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers—SOLACE—and the Improvement Service, which is called council of the future. It has a sub-pathway on digital services. The blue badge process has been picked up by that, because it can be cumbersome to go through that process online, depending on how you go through it. It 100 per cent has to be easier, and it has to be available offline too, but we also need to look at having a different service where there is automatic entitlement. We have done that for free school meals, vouchers for uniforms, clothing grants and so on. We have to

remove the stigma of having to apply and consider how we use intelligent automation, artificial intelligence and the data from our council services to predict when somebody needs that blue badge and the other available services. It is like when you go to Amazon to buy something and are served up an advert that says that people who have got that item might also be interested in these other items.

That big piece of work is under way. The discovery phase on the challenges around the issue was done in around three months, and the next phase, which is being carried out by the Improvement Service, not me, is looking at those challenges at the moment.

**The Convener:** Thank you. That clarification is very helpful. We might come back to you to check on the progress of that work.

**Martyn Wallace:** No problem.

**The Convener:** I turn to James Dornan, who—to prove that our technology is working—joins us online.

**James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):** I was tempted to pretend that it was not working, but the reality is that it is working fine, convener.

I am interested to hear that point about blue badges, because my partner has one, and we found it difficult to get that sorted. Anything that improves that process would be good news.

I want to ask about sharing good practice on digital inclusion. Lesley Fraser mentioned that subject earlier, but could somebody tell me how good practice is currently shared, and how you can improve collaborative working and co-ordination across the Government? For example, how are examples from the Near Me service and Social Security Scotland being shared across other departments?

**Lesley Fraser:** That issue is an important stimulus for the digital inclusion alliance work that we are co-ordinating and which involves us, local government partners, the third sector and the private sector. We are thinking about what we can co-ordinate and the ways that we can work together that will have the biggest impact.

I ask Eilidh McLaughlin to talk a bit more about how we do that.

**Eilidh McLaughlin:** As Lesley Fraser mentioned, the digital inclusion alliance is an important hub for that. We already have up and running a community of practice for learning and sharing knowledge. Over a period of months, we have held several sessions where we have invited not just Government and local authority but third sector experts in the area to share good practice. For example, that has involved the Simon

Community Scotland, the Mhor Collective and even library services through the Scottish Library and Information Council.

Internally, in the connecting Scotland programme, we have been doing a policy mapping exercise to understand which policies and strategies across the Scottish Government are likely to have a digital inclusion strand, so that we can bring our knowledge as a team into that space to support the delivery. In the connecting Scotland team, we work alongside digital inclusion and Digital Lifelines colleagues. Indeed, there is always connecting Scotland representation on their governance boards, so we are not only keeping our knowledge up to date but can use that connection to feed out that knowledge into the wider community.

**James Dornan:** You mentioned the private and third sectors. To what extent are you partnering with them? Can you give us examples of how they have learned from you and also how you have learned from them?

**Eilidh McLaughlin:** Absolutely. In the third sector, I would highlight SCVO's contribution in this space. It is our key delivery partner and was fundamental to the delivery of the 60,000-plus devices during the pandemic. It was already an expert in digital inclusion and we have learned a lot from it about good approaches, particularly with regard to place-based design and using a digital champion network to support people in their area to enable them to connect in a way that feels important but comfortable to that person. That has been key to our learning, the development of our full business case and our subsequent actions.

The private sector has been really helpful. For example, Standard Life, which is part of the Phoenix Group, recently kindly helped with the relaunch of the digital inclusion charter for Scotland. It is doing a lot with its staff to ensure that they are aware of digital inclusion issues. The result is that, when somebody phones Standard Life or Phoenix Group for support, the person on the phone can not only talk through what they can do on their screen but can also see what the customer sees on an app or web portal and help them manoeuvre through that.

In public service, and in customer service in the private sector, awareness raising is important in helping develop empathy for those who are not currently online.

**James Dornan:** You have given two examples of how good practice from the private and third sector has benefited the public sector. What about the other way round? Have you seen examples of the public sector particularly benefiting the third sector?

**Eilidh McLaughlin:** I will call out some of the examples that are used in the Audit Scotland report, particularly around Digital Lifelines Scotland and digital inclusion. The Digital Lifelines programme's work with people who are users of drugs or in recovery from the use of drugs is quite different from anything that we have seen before, and the results are very interesting. Partners such as the Simon Community and Digital Lifelines Scotland have worked really closely together, so there has been sharing back and forth of that knowledge.

With the Scottish Government's position on digital inclusion, the progress that we have made on it and the recommendations in the report that is in front of us, Scotland is seen as a leader in the UK. That is not only because of the funding, the position during the pandemic with the gifting of devices and connectivity, and the provision of skills support to people, but also because of the learning that we have taken and how we have shared that outwards, not only in Scotland but with other Administrations around the UK.

**James Dornan:** How is awareness raised about service design tools and other methods to support digital inclusion, such as social tariffs and developing the minimum digital living standard?

**Eilidh McLaughlin:** In my team, we use the service design principles in developing any policy direction or delivery option that we have. When we were considering whether it was right to bring in a minimum digital living standard for Scotland and were doing the research with the universities of Liverpool, Loughborough and Glasgow, we applied service design principles to that work to ensure that we were outcome focused and user led and that we were using the appropriate data. Those things are all really important.

As Geoff Huggins mentioned, the service design principles are there for the public sector to use and they should be followed. Whenever anybody is looking at a digital inclusion programme, they should be following those service principles in designing it. The value add that we will bring with the minimum digital living standard is to bring extra guidance and advice to those service standards so that they become much more prominent in people's minds as they deliver in that way.

**James Dornan:** There is potential for you to continue to share that knowledge with the private and third sectors to make sure that everybody benefits from it.

**Eilidh McLaughlin:** Absolutely.

**The Convener:** We have time for one final question, and I am going to award it to the deputy convener.

**Jamie Greene:** I will have to choose between the two questions that I had shortlisted, but that is fine. I will ask about rural connectivity, which is an important area and one that is of particular relevance to Scotland. The report hones in on it in a whole section and particularly in paragraph 21, on coverage in urban areas versus rural areas.

On the back of what Geoff Huggins said, I appreciate that getting to the last couple of per cent of people is always the most difficult and often the most expensive as well, from a technical, physical and logistical point of view. However, I am aware of the Scottish and UK Government schemes and the work in the private sector. Lots of activity is taking place on things such as the broadband voucher scheme, the shared rural network and so on. Can you give me an update on the progress on that? When do you think you might hit 100 per cent to ensure that rural communities have access to 4G and broadband that is as good as the access that urban communities and cities have?

**Geoff Huggins:** As I said earlier, we have made significant progress. We took a big step in 2023, when we put in 16 undersea cables across the north. On the basis of those cables going in, we are now doing the build-out of the broadband infrastructure across the islands. In some cases, the number of people on those islands is pretty small. We have managed to take that a fairly long way.

Beyond that, we are working closely with the UK Government on the gigabit scheme and particularly on what is described, if I recall correctly, as lot C. Basically, after we do the larger geographical tranches of Scotland, it takes us to everything that is left behind that has not fallen into one of those. We will be meeting UK Government colleagues this afternoon to discuss how to approach that. Under the previous UK Government, in effect, a price cap was set for particular properties, which was significantly below what we estimated it would take to reach 100 per cent. We are expecting a degree of flexibility on that.

As I said earlier, we are also considering issues in respect of low earth orbit satellites, which have certainly improved. Over the next period, we are going to see more networks appear over Scotland, in addition to the Starlink network. We are aware that the Kuiper network has begun to roll out, and it will extend across a large area of Scotland in 2025. That gives us another option as regards how we can meet the target.

On when we will reach 100 per cent connectivity, we are probably looking at somewhere between 2027 and towards the end of 2028, but we are pretty close. We are getting to

the point where it is coming down to groups of individual properties across the country.

**Jamie Greene:** That is very helpful. Thank you.

**The Convener:** I am afraid that we have run out of time. I thank our witnesses Lesley Fraser, Geoff Huggins, Eilidh McLaughlin and Martyn Wallace for the evidence that they have given us and the response that they have given to the Audit Scotland and Accounts Commission report on tackling digital exclusion. We will consider our next steps but, for the time being, I thank them again.

I move this morning's committee meeting into private session.

10:31

*Meeting continued in private until 10:50.*



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The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

**Monday 2 December 2024**

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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