



Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

Call for evidence: Digital inclusion action plan

SCVO Response

SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations) is Scotland's national membership body for voluntary sector organisations, including charities and social enterprises. We comprise a membership of over 3,200 organisations across the country. Our mission is to support, promote and develop a confident, sustainable voluntary sector in Scotland.

We have been leading the conversation in digital inclusion in Scotland for more than ten years, and in that time have delivered a number of interventions, campaigns and programmes to promote and support a more digitally inclusive society.

1. Government has identified five population groups that would likely benefit greatly from digital inclusion initiatives, these are:

- Low-income households
- Older people
- Disabled people
- Unemployed and those seeking work
- Young people

Do you agree with these five population groups?

We agree that the outlined demographic groups are a helpful reflection of the groups most likely to face issues stemming from digital exclusion. However, we suggest a key area for development: clarification on the status or inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees.

In our experience, New Scots (the Scottish Government definition of people who have been forcibly displaced or escaping persecution) face significantly increased risk of digital exclusion. This is a result of a number of factors:

- **Economic:** An inability to afford a device or maintain an internet connection
- **Cultural:** A lack of culturally appropriate opportunities to build skills and confidence
- **Trust:** individuals escaping persecution can display increased levels of distrust in digital products and services.
- **Literacy:** Language barriers can prevent the uptake of support for asylum seekers.

Given that digital inclusion is crucial to integration and economic inclusion, we believe that there needs to be increased clarity on the status of how the Action Plan will support refugees and asylum seekers to access culturally appropriate and affordable routes to online engagement.



An example from our own practice is supporting West of Scotland Regional Equality Council (WSREC) to identify opportunities to utilise AI to support language development for people who speak English as a second language. This is a cost-effective model which can enhance motivation to use digital tools.

We feel it is important to note that digital exclusion can happen to anyone at any time. Demographic groups are a useful way to segment and provide appropriate support, but the Action Plan and any future strategy or rollout should maintain a flexible and responsive approach that recognises how digital exclusion intersects with life events. For example, poverty, illness, sudden job loss, changes in skill requirements, price rises, and cost-of-living fluctuations can all impact the degree to which people feel confident and able to use the internet.

2. Are there examples of digital inclusion initiatives that could be scaled up or replicated in other local communities? If known, please provide the name of the initiative, the organisation, a summary of what they do and contact details (if relevant).

At SCVO, we have been leading the digital inclusion landscape for more than ten years. In this time, we have developed or supported several scalable and replicable models of digital inclusion.

Successful initiatives in digital inclusion are generally driven dedicated people who can pull together the right partnerships to reach people with the right support at the right time. There is a lack of available, dedicated digital inclusion funding, so success will often depend on people and organisations taking action with limited resources.

SCVO's Place-based Approach to Digital Inclusion

We pioneered an innovative model of place-based digital inclusion which has since been replicated across the UK. The key elements of this model are:

- The work must be driven by local people, who are passionate and knowledgeable about local assets. Leadership is key here – and we recognise the value of local authorities in this role.
- A third-party critical friend or facilitator is key to draw out problems, ideas and solutions.
- Meaningful partnership working is necessary and must be based in trust and willingness to collaborate, share resources and participate.
- Taking an iterative approach, based on the Scottish Approach to Service Design, allows the efficient development of priorities and solutions.

SCVO Place Based - Citizen Voice and Renfrewshire



In Renfrewshire, SCVO partnered with Renfrewshire Council to develop a place-based digital inclusion pilot, shaped by the voices of local organisations and communities. Central to this approach was the formation of *Citizen Voice*—a cross-sector co-production group that met regularly to identify challenges, share insight, and inform project design. This iterative and inclusive process ensured representation across the voluntary sector, housing, health and social care, and local government.

Insights from the group identified key barriers to digital participation, including lack of access, resources, and confidence. In response, a pilot model was developed with a blended delivery approach combining face-to-face and digital support. The initiative was underpinned by the creation of a *Digital Champion Network* and co-ordinated through a newly funded *Digital Champion Co-ordinator* role, positioned to build a connected and sustainable local digital support ecosystem.

As a result of this work, £100,000 was awarded to launch the Digital Champion programme and a device refurbishment scheme—enabling greater access to support, connectivity, and refurbished technology in communities.

This model exemplifies how local, collaborative approaches can drive inclusive, sustainable digital support rooted in community expertise.

Learning from this example includes:

- **The vital role of intermediary bodies in a difficult resource landscape.**
The introduction of the place-based model facilitated by SCVO directly resulted in securing greater resources for digital inclusion work in Renfrewshire. The facilitation role was crucial to the development of work and realisation of assets. It is crucial to resource intermediary bodies for this reason.
- **Every community has assets that can be realised.**
Part of Renfrewshire’s journey has been mapping what is available around the place. This is central to any place-based model. As a result, there is great collaboration. This can be easily duplicated in different parts of the UK, and has been.

Harbour Ayrshire

Harbour Ayrshire is a charity supporting the recovery community across Ayrshire, working with individuals who have experienced drug and alcohol addiction. In 2024, the organisation received funding through the Scottish Government’s *Digital Lifelines* initiative, for which SCVO was a key delivery partner.

Through this programme, Harbour supported individuals by delivering online peer-support sessions designed to develop essential digital skills. Once participants gain confidence in using technology, they are offered access to ‘Zoom Rooms’—safe, supportive online spaces where people in recovery can connect with others. Each participant is provided with a device and internet connection, removing key barriers to participation and digital access.

Harbour Ayrshire represents a cost-effective and scalable model of digital inclusion within health and social care. They have demonstrated that, for the cost of a single smartphone and



internet connection, the resulting reduction in crisis support needs can lead to significant savings for public services. Harbour estimated the cost of one of their service users' 'revolving door' presentations at crisis services and prison cost £116,724 over the course of a year. Introducing digital support therefore presented significant savings.

This example clearly illustrates how targeted digital inclusion efforts can deliver meaningful improvements in health outcomes while also reducing pressure on public services. With the right investment, models like Harbour's could be scaled to deliver both social impact and financial sustainability across Scotland.

North-West Glasgow Voluntary Sector Network – Plugged In project

North-West Glasgow Voluntary Sector Network (NWGVSN) is a support organisation that offers advocacy, training, advice and networking to charities and community groups in the north west of Glasgow. During lockdown, member organisations highlighted that digital exclusion was becoming increasingly clear as they moved their services online. Previously, they had relied on community and library services, now closed as a result of the pandemic. NWGVSN saw the opportunity to begin refurbishing unused devices for the benefit of people who lacked access.

Since May 2020, NWGVSN have distributed more than 2000 devices to digitally excluded people. They have done this without the funding they urgently require, primarily due to a lack of available resources for this work. The project has two laudable outcomes: not only are digitally excluded people gaining free access to a device of their own, but significant levels of e-waste are diverted from landfill.

Despite providing cost-effective 'solutions' for two of Scotland's most pressing concerns (poverty and the climate crisis), NWGVSN remains unfunded for this work.* They are a prime example of scalable work running on limited resources. Scotland's voluntary sector as consistently provided solutions to complex problems.

The case study of NWGVSN demonstrates two important lessons:

- **Organisations need to be provided the capacity to deliver.**
With a part-time team of two, the organisation has supported over 2000 people to get online with dignity. They are a frontline organisation that know their user base well, and can quickly mobilise and deliver. If organisations like this can be fairly funded and provided capacity, scaling up would be achievable.
- **Device refurbishment and distribution is already happening to great success.**
As an intermediary body for the voluntary sector, we believe it's crucial to recognise the work that is already happening in communities, to support and celebrate it, and most importantly to not duplicate. Our key recommendation in this space would be not to establish new initiatives, but to strengthen the ones that already exist.

* Note: Since submission of this evidence, NWGVSN have been awarded £50,000 from Glasgow City Council who have recognised the importance of this work through their LEZ Community Fund.



3. Are there examples of evaluation models for measuring the impact of digital inclusions programs that you are aware of? Please provide details of these models and where they have been used (if known).

At SCVO we have ample experience of measuring the impact of digital inclusion interventions. Over the last ten years we have designed, developed and implemented a number of different models of evaluation for different purposes.

SCVO Maturity Assessment

We developed an organisational maturity index for organisations delivering on digital inclusion. This assessment measures:

- **Understanding:** the extent to which the organisation can demonstrate it understands the issue of digital exclusion and how it impacts their service users.
- **Approach:** how embedded digital inclusion is in the service's processes, and how this is measured.
- **Resource:** the level of investment the organisation has provided for digital inclusion work, and
- **Partnership:** the value the organisation places on partnership to deliver successful digital inclusion work.

This assessment measures the readiness (or maturity) of interventions at an organisational level and allows us to target our support more clearly. So far 35 organisations have taken the assessment. This has allowed us to get a more insightful picture of the state of digital inclusion for organisations at a national level. Although we have a small sample, we have some emerging insights:

- Organisations score highest in the 'partnership' category, and lowest in the 'resource' category.
- Charities with an income of £100k - £1million scored the highest, followed by the public sector (primarily local authority teams e.g. CLD and adult learning).
- Charities with an income of under £100k (only 2 organisations in our sample) had the lowest digital inclusion maturity scores.

Impact Survey data

As part of our programmes with Digital Health & Care, Digital Lifelines and Digital Pioneers/Connecting to Care, we ask organisations to measure the improvement of skills and confidence among service users. We can then use this data to understand how digital inclusion interventions have an impact in the provision of health services.



Digital Check Up

SCVO developed the Digital Skills Checkup (available at: <https://skills.checkup.scot>) which measures individual's abilities against the Essential Digital Skills framework, offering advice and resources for areas for improvement. This has been used by practitioners across the UK in digital inclusion initiatives and offers us insights into skills, both for Life and Work.

Final thoughts on evaluation

At SCVO, most of the evaluation and impact measurement tools we use are designed to capture individual-level outcomes—how a particular intervention has supported someone to develop their digital skills or confidence. While this provides valuable insight into personal progress, it is far more challenging to assess the broader, systemic impact of digital inclusion programmes. For instance, although we can demonstrate that individuals supported through our initiatives have improved their digital capabilities, we lack robust mechanisms to evaluate whether digital inclusion becomes embedded or sustained within the wider service infrastructure. Additionally, many of the organisations that engage with our work are already predisposed to offering digital support, which can make it difficult to assess the true extent of cultural or structural change prompted by our interventions.

This was the motivation behind developing the Digital Inclusion Maturity Assessment, to understand where organisations are. It is not, however, a robust enough framework to measure systemic change.

4. In what ways could the government partner with industry, charities and community organisations to promote digital inclusion?

SCVO brings over a decade of experience in cross-sector collaboration to promote and deliver digital inclusion in Scotland. From our leadership role in Connecting Scotland—a landmark programme built on collaboration between Scottish Government, local authorities, charities, and tech partners which supported over 60,000 households to get online—to bespoke partnerships such as our work with Phoenix Group to build their understanding and capacity to support digitally excluded customers, we have seen that meaningful progress depends on more than just promotion—it needs action.

The challenge now is not in just convincing people that digital inclusion matters, it is also in resourcing and coordinating action at scale. Government must move beyond promotion and invest in delivering solutions with and through the organisations that already have trusted relationships in communities.

A model of partnership we recommend is Scotland's Digital Inclusion Charter—a gold standard in cross-sector collaboration. The Charter brings together public, private and voluntary sector organisations committed to shared principles and practical change. It works because it's built on values, shared learning, and action—not just messaging.

To enable genuine partnership, government must:



- Resource the voluntary sector to deliver digital inclusion in local communities, recognising the deep, place-based knowledge and assets that already exist. In doing so, Government can engage in continual learning around what works in practice.
- Actively link industry and community organisations to bridge the gap between lived experience and product/service design. This can't be left to chance—there must be a clear vehicle or mechanism to facilitate these connections.
- Encourage cross-sector learning, where insights from community work shape decisions at policy and business level.
- Ensure equitable distribution of resources, so responsibility doesn't fall disproportionately on under-resourced charities while those controlling access—pricing, service design, exclusionary practices—avoid accountability. There needs to be a more robust policy response whereby those profiting from digital expansion have a clearer role in providing support.

5. How can the government ensure the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund best supports local communities across the UK?

To ensure the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund best supports local communities across the UK, government must prioritise fair, accessible, and sustainable funding models that empower people and organisations already delivering impactful digital inclusion work.

SCVO advocates for a Fair Funding approach, grounded in multi-year, flexible, and accessible funding that values the contribution of voluntary organisations and enables them to plan and deliver services confidently and sustainably. Fair funding isn't just about money—it's about relationships, trust, and recognising the infrastructure required to do the work well.

We urge the Fund to support a mix of capital and revenue funding. Devices and connectivity are critical—but equally vital is funding for the people who make digital inclusion happen. Without investment in the trusted relationships, outreach, training, and long-term support that charities provide, communities are left behind.

We would also encourage a reframing of 'innovation'. Innovation funding tends to seek new ideas rather than backing proven, effective models. SCVO has distributed numerous successful digital inclusion funds—Digital Lifelines, the Digital Participation Charter Fund, and the CLD Device Fund, among others. These have shown that what works is not necessarily new but well-targeted, community-rooted delivery, led by trusted organisations.

Critically, we know that funding is most effective when delivered through intermediary organisations like SCVO. We understand the sector, can identify gaps, support grantees, and ensure funding gets to where it will make the biggest difference. Our Community of Learning model in Digital Lifelines has created a rich environment for shared learning, capacity building, and continuous improvement—supporting practitioners, not just projects.



We strongly caution against duplication and fragmentation. National funds must build on the existing infrastructure, relationships, and learning already in place across the UK. The value of intermediary organisations must be recognised—not only as grant managers, but as strategic partners in shaping, targeting, and evaluating impact.

We would be happy to discuss our extensive experience in managing digital inclusion grants at a national level with DSIT.

6. The government has identified four focus areas for how it will drive up digital inclusion, these are:

- Opening up opportunities through skills
- Tackling data and device poverty
- Breaking down barriers to digital services
- Building confidence

Do you agree with these four focus areas?

These four focus areas reflect the reality of tackling digital exclusion. We welcome the more nuanced approach here and the inclusion of ‘breaking down barriers to digital services’. There is a strong alignment between these areas of focus and SCVO’s 5 ‘challenges’ set out in [“Making digital inclusion everyone’s responsibility: a roadmap for Scotland.”](#)

In addition to these areas of focus, we also believe that there are key enablers that need to be activated to help address these challenges:

- **Policy:** leadership from government to identify and embed opportunities for digital inclusion across different policy areas.
- **Resource:** alongside funding, we need to ensure that we are making the right resource contributions. This will vary across the different sectors, but it should play to strengths e.g. human resources in the voluntary sector.
- **Partnership:** empowering communities and place-based approaches to build on local assets and strengths, alongside national and strategic partnerships that can support a digital inclusion infrastructure.

7. For each focus area, has the government identified the right objectives? Please refer to the objectives in the Action Plan document.

7.1 Opening up opportunities through skills

We agree with the objectives set out here and have nothing further to add.

7.2 Tackling data and device poverty

There are some questions and feedback we have to the outlined objectives.

The government has identified the right overarching ambition: ensuring that everyone has access to sufficient, affordable and reliable internet connectivity and devices that are suitable for their lives. That framing reflects the right direction of travel and shows an understanding that both connectivity and access to devices are fundamental to digital inclusion.

The three objectives set out for 2030 provide a good starting point. Nationwide gigabit broadband and 5G Standalone (5GSA) coverage in all populated areas is an ambitious and necessary goal. But it's essential that this doesn't stop at just 'populated areas'. Remote rural communities, such as those in the Highlands and Islands, risk being left behind unless there is a clear safety net in place. Without that, the digital divide could deepen geographically.

The second objective — improving the range of connectivity options for people facing affordability issues — is welcome, particularly in recognising that many are not entirely offline but instead struggle to stay online consistently. However, this will need concrete mechanisms to make a real difference: for example, better promotion and expansion of social tariffs, alongside a deeper understanding of the lived experience of people in data poverty.

A notable omission is around the 3G switch-off. Many people, particularly those with older or more affordable devices, still rely on 3G technology. Any plan for tackling data poverty must include protections and proactive support for people during this transition — including outreach, communication in accessible formats, and potentially device replacement schemes.

Finally, the third objective — removing the affordability of devices as a barrier — is absolutely the right goal but currently feels too vague. There needs to be greater specificity about what the government will do to reach this point. Are we looking at new funding streams, partnerships with industry, support for device recycling and refurbishment, or something else? Setting the direction of travel here, and being clear on how it aligns with other objectives like sustainability and inclusion, will be key to success.

So while the objectives are broadly right, some important gaps need addressing — and the success of this focus area will depend on the clarity, detail, and accountability built into its delivery.

7.3 Breaking down barriers to digital services

Our Roadmap discusses the importance of inclusive design as a critical element of digital inclusion, and we welcome the role it has to play in the Action Plan. We particularly agree with the inclusion of “appropriate and well-supported alternative pathways for those who need them.”

The objectives should centre on embedding inclusive design as a golden thread running through the entire lifecycle of service delivery — from policy intent right through to frontline practice. It's not enough to design inclusive digital services in theory; the principles must be lived and reflected in how services are implemented and experienced on the ground.



To achieve this, we need a holistic approach that brings together three key components:

1. **Well-designed digital services** that are intuitive, accessible, and genuinely meet user needs.
2. **Confident and empowered staff** who understand inclusive design and are able to support users effectively.
3. **Systems and practices that align the two**, ensuring that the digital tools and the human support elements work in concert — not in silos.

Together, these should create services that are not only inclusive by design but also inclusive in delivery. This approach will help reduce failure demand, improve user trust and satisfaction, and ensure services are truly accessible and effective for everyone.

7.4 Building confidence

We agree with the objectives set out here and have nothing further to add.

8. For each focus area, has government identified the right medium and long-term next steps? Please refer to the next steps in the Digital Inclusion Action Plan document.

8.1 Opening up opportunities through skills

A regular review of the Essential Digital Skills (EDS) framework is welcome and necessary. As technology evolves and our reliance on digital increases, so too does the need to develop different digital skills. This requires constant review of the EDS framework. We would welcome a shift from competency-based skills to a mix of competencies and critical understanding. Demonstrating the ability to execute a task should also be supported by a critical understanding of the digital space. We would welcome a move to something more aligned to how the Minimum Digital Living Standards (MDLS) articulates digital skills and critical understanding. This would bring greater alignment to work on digital skills across the UK.

A previous challenge with the EDS framework has been how it's used in England compared to the devolved governments. When it was linked to a qualification in England this impeded the ability to meaningfully update it as any updates impacted on the delivery of adult education programmes in England. Leadership from DSIT and collaboration with devolved governments would be beneficial in streamlining the EDS framework and how it is used and embedded across all four nations. A UK framework that is limited in its ability to develop and evolve because of how it is used in one jurisdiction will impact on its application in the other nations.

We are very pleased to see leadership from DSIT through plans to integrate current and future EDS Frameworks into the core skills curriculum for the Civil Service. We cannot expect other sectors to embed digital inclusion if government isn't playing its role. A similar framework has been developed for the health and social care workforce in Scotland. NHS Education for Scotland (NES) have developed the Digital and Data Capability Framework, supported by a learner pathway.



We would suggest some caution at plans to enhance the role of DWP work coaches support digital skills development. There can be a role to play by DWP here, but it should not be the main focus of engaging with hard-to-reach groups. Extensive experience from the digital inclusion sector tells us that trusted, pre-existing relationships are key to building digital skills and confidence in a meaningful way. The relationship between citizens and work coaches may not always provide a good basis for this kind of relationship to develop. This also risks the digital skills development focusing on employability tasks, and experience tells us that people learn best when their journey starts with the things that are important to them (the 'hook'). Work coaches will also only be able to reach a segment of the 'hard-to-reach' group, which will exclude people in working poverty.

A greater focus on public libraries and the voluntary sector will more effectively target 'hard-to-reach' groups. The interventions required include online self-directed learning opportunities – these can work best for those that are currently digitally included and need to commit to continued digital skills development. For beginners, community-based support (those trusted faces in local places) can be best. Evidence from Scotland's [Digital Participation Charter Fund](#) and other projects to build foundation and essential digital skills has shown that people learn best from:

- Short bursts of repeated activity
- Over a prolonged period of time
- In an informal setting
- Face-to-face
- On a one-to-one basis or in small groups
- Situated in the wider context of the learner's life

The provision of such support can be patchy across our communities, often making it difficult for people to find opportunities local to them. Initiatives like the [National Digital Inclusion Network](#) from Good Things Foundation are helpful for finding such opportunities. We need a well-resourced network of digital upskilling opportunities in local communities, that people know how and where to access.

We believe that there are examples of good practice that activity could be built on. In Scotland we have been pioneering place-based digital inclusion while also developing wider work in the voluntary sector with village halls. Village halls are invaluable community assets that can play a crucial role in helping people build their digital skills in a supported and familiar setting.

WHALE Arts: An example from practice

WHALE Arts is a community-led arts charity, social enterprise and community anchor organisation based in a purpose-built arts centre. It was established by local people in Wester Hailes, Edinburgh in 1992. They deliver creative, community, skills and capacity development



programmes which are designed to meet their community's specific needs and help people cope with the impacts of poverty.

WHALE Arts have recently created a new Creative Digital Collaborative Space in their building. They will deliver a new Digital and Enterprise Support Programme in this new facility to support residents to learn digital skills and develop enterprise opportunities.

Sessions are delivered by the Digital Inclusion Lead and are open to anyone who wants to improve their digital skills and increase their confidence using digital technologies. They also provide additional support to people who are interested in starting their own business but who lack the digital skills or know-how to do so. These sessions are run in small groups on a drop-in basis.

They also run community outreach sessions with a focus on basic digital skills, with the aim of encouraging participants to attend the sessions based in their building where they can access more in-depth support. Delivering outreach sessions in different venues across Wester Hailes which are used and trusted by the local community reduces barriers to access and helps people who are digitally excluded feel comfortable and relaxed.

8.2 Tackling data and device poverty

Connectivity

The challenge in addressing data poverty is that there is no single solution. A range of options need to be available to address the diversity of need.

Social tariffs have an important role to play in addressing digital exclusion, but they have limited scope. Evidence tells us that there remain significant barriers to social tariffs as the uptake remains at 10% of eligible households. The low uptake of social tariffs is perhaps unsurprising given the evidence around financial literacy compounding data poverty. Most social tariffs require a credit check which can be a detrimental factor for many of those eligible, preventing access.

Further consumer protections around connectivity, aligning it to other essential utilities, would be a welcome and bold move that recognises the increasing reliance on digital in all aspects of life.

Plans to work further with mobile network operators (MNOs) on easier access to government websites and online services is very welcome and presents an opportunity for some bold approaches. Data poverty means that essential public services are not free at the point of access. For someone on a tariff with a data cap, connectivity is a resource that must be rationed. This means that any decision to use a public service online has a cost implication, which can impact and limit the ability of that person to do other essential tasks online. Consequently, essential public services now bear a financial cost for some people to access them.

A high proportion of those who are digitally excluded live in social housing and therefore housing associations are a crucial partner in addressing data poverty. SCVO is currently delivering a funding programme for social housing providers in Scotland, as part of the Connecting Scotland programme. The learning from this work can help identify best practice for work in this sector.



Access outside the home, with mobile devices, also remains important – not least for those unable to afford a home connection. Public Wi-Fi remains a crucial lifeline for people facing data poverty, and we are supportive of initiatives to increase this access in more populated areas, acknowledging that this option does not serve remote and rural communities.

There remains a need for long term data gifting schemes to support those experiencing sustained digital exclusion. Such schemes are an essential lifeline for individuals and families living in poverty.

Devices

Scotland has an active [device refurbishment community](#), providing affordable or free devices to local communities experiencing digital exclusion. A lot of climate activism, which includes device refurbishment, is led by local community organisations. SCVO undertook an engagement exercise with Scotland's device refurbishment organisations in 2023, which resulted in our ['Natural Allies: Digital inclusion and the circular economy'](#) report. Key learning from this report highlighted that:

- There is a lack of recognition or knowledge about the work of refurbishment organisations at both ends of the market (donors and users), and as a result the work can be fragmented. However, in local communities, this work is delivering cost-effective outcomes.
- Resourcing for this work is critically low, and as a result organisations are not able to maximise their reach. Funding, availability of devices and human resource and capacity is too low currently for the level of need experienced in communities. There is a risk that if funding or resources are diverted to new organisations, existing work will suffer.
- Devices are only part of the solution, and connectivity is increasingly unsustainable. While we know that there are five key pillars of digital inclusion, organisations are not being resourced to provide affordable, reliable connectivity that works for the needs of the people accessing the service.

These device refurbishment organisations are rooted in communities and understand local need; however, they remain significantly under-resourced. These organisations are not simply taking donations of devices that have been refurbished elsewhere, they are completing the refurbishment work themselves. There is an opportunity to further invest in these organisations to build a more effective network or organisations that already have the reach into 'hard-to-reach' communities that larger national or UK-wide organisations will not have.

In the allocation of resources, such as devices, it is critical that there is an understanding of local need. This ensures that limited resources are going to where they can make the biggest impact and reduces the risk of duplication of existing activity.

SCVO has significant experience in working in this context, particularly through the development of the Connecting Scotland programme. A fundamental design decision in this programme was working in partnership with local authorities. We successfully onboarded all 32 Scottish local authorities as programme partners, convening 32 separate decision-making panels for each round of device allocations. In addition to this, we were able to leverage our network of over 3,000 member organisations to ensure we had a significant reach across



Scotland. This was critical for us in understanding which local organisations had a reach into different communities, and how well they'd be able to deliver digital skills support. We allocated over 60,000 devices through this process. We also gained significant experience in the complexity of device and connectivity distribution, tracking orders, securing data returns for monitoring purposes and troubleshooting issues and faulty devices through a dedicated helpdesk.

We would be happy to further share our expertise in this with DSIT and advise that any plans for device distribution is built on existing networks and systems that have the reach into the communities that need them the most.

8.3 Breaking down barriers to digital services

We support this approach as it aligns with our 'inclusive design' challenge in our Roadmap. This isn't just how digital services are designed, but how they are made inclusive for everyone to use regardless of their skills, confidence or access to a device/connectivity. This is an important element to include in our shared understanding of digital inclusion as it challenges the narrative on the steps an individual must take to be included and asks what services can do to support this as they ultimately benefit from increased digital engagement.

Often 'choice' is referenced in the discourse around digital public services. This is often articulated as having a non-digital alternative for those who do not wish to access the service digitally. There is little consideration of how 'choice' should also mean empowering people to choose a digital option and supporting them to overcome their barriers e.g. motivation, skills, device, connectivity.

Through the 'Digital Inclusion' programme with Scottish Government's Digital Health and Care (DHaC) division we are developing a framework for embedding digital inclusion in health and social care services (final papers to be published in early summer 2025). The current selection of papers on the different 'pillars' can be found on the programme resource page, and we would be happy to share further insights with DSIT.

The approach developed by SCVO to support services/organisations become digitally inclusive is embedded across all our work, from our Digital Inclusion Maturity Assessment to Scotland's Digital Inclusion Charter. Our experience in the delivery of digital inclusion programmes has shaped our framework, a minimum standard that is universal in its relevance across all sectors:

- **Understanding:** organisations understand the issue of digital exclusion and how it impacts their service users.
- **Approach:** organisations use their understanding of digital exclusion to design an approach that embeds digital inclusion in their processes.
- **Resource:** suitable resources are allocated to support digital inclusion to be embedded e.g., human resources, time, capacity, technology or finance.
- **Partnership:** organisations recognise that digital inclusion cannot be achieved in isolation and work in both operational and strategic partnerships to maximise their efforts and minimise the risk of duplication.

Royal Bank of Scotland: Example from practice

The Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) has a demo app for their online banking platform. This is a good example of inclusive design as they understand the barriers to online banking and have provided an opportunity for familiarisation. This has been a useful tool for digital inclusion practitioners as it helps minimise barriers, supporting individual motivation and skills/confidence.

8.4 Building confidence

The government has identified many of the right themes in its proposed medium and long-term actions for building confidence, particularly its recognition that trust and motivation are central to digital inclusion. However, there are areas where this could be strengthened further, particularly in how these actions translate into practical support for the public and practitioners.

We welcome the focus on strengthening the evidence base around motivational barriers. While much of the existing research is dated or not sufficiently focused on people who remain offline, it's important to acknowledge that many useful insights already exist (for example, One Digital) particularly around intrinsic motivations and the value placed on trusted relationships. Building on that historic research while updating it with lived experience today will help ensure the Government doesn't start from scratch unnecessarily.

The government's recognition that not everyone will choose to be online is also important. A tolerance for people to opt out must be part of a rights-based approach to digital inclusion. Building confidence doesn't mean pressuring people to go online, but rather creating the conditions where people feel safe, supported, and able to make that choice for themselves. Building on this, we would welcome actions that reinforce designing this choice into the design of services.

The emphasis on online safety and public awareness is also vital. Fear is consistently cited as one of the biggest confidence barriers. However, current messaging on online safety can feel overwhelming and inconsistent for learners and practitioners alike. People are often unsure where to start, and the current discourse rarely distinguishes between different types of online safety concerns—be it scams, data privacy, or harmful content.

This is where the Online Safety Act (2023) could have a significant role to play. It introduces a strong framework of protections, but unless the public knows about these safeguards, and practitioners understand how to support people in navigating them, it won't ease fear. There's a real opportunity here to simplify and promote what protections are already in place in a way that feels practical and empowering. Good local examples—such as East Renfrewshire's consumer protection work—could be expanded to help people feel there's a safety net, not just a risk.

The focus on supporting local networks and scaling up effective models is another welcome step. Local delivery is where confidence is most often built—through trusted relationships and wraparound support. But this must be done in close collaboration with those on the ground, and with recognition that what works in one place won't necessarily work elsewhere. Government support should enable flexibility and responsiveness to local needs.

In summary, the government is broadly pointing in the right direction, especially in tackling confidence as a complex and systemic issue. But the success of these actions will depend on how well they address the nuanced, messy realities people face—and how clearly and accessibly they are communicated. There's a strong foundation here; the next step is making it meaningful.

9. Additional information and feedback

The overarching theme of the feedback we have provided in this response is clearly about respecting and understanding the current landscape. As the membership body for Scotland's voluntary sector, we are concerned by the risk of duplication that results from a lack of consideration of Scotland's strong, if chronically under-resourced, digital inclusion community. Throughout this feedback, we have provided examples of best practice that meet the objectives of the Action Plan and would encourage DSIT to communicate with and learn from these organisations – especially with reference to our strong and able device refurbishment sector.

We would also advocate for strong, effective and cohesive leadership that brings the work of the four nations together. While each of the devolved nations has their own approach, we believe there are ample opportunities for learning and collaboration which could be facilitated at a UK level. It will be important to balance this with respecting devolved administrations and the policy approaches they are taking.

At SCVO, we have been disappointed with the lack of leadership demonstrated by Scottish Government over the past three years. This has also been reflected on in Audit Scotland's 'Tackling digital exclusion' report (2024) and the Scottish Government's own Scottish Minimum Digital Living Standard interim report (2025). Action to reverse the trend of increasing digital exclusion being faced by some of Scotland and the UK's most vulnerable people needs to be decisive and urgent and requires consensual leadership.

When we asked our advisory group — made up of organisations leading the digital inclusion response in Scotland — what a Scottish digital inclusion strategy should include, they identified five clear themes:

- **Resource:** Without dedicated funding and support, even the most ambitious strategy risks falling flat. Practitioners are already stretched and feel fragile. The strategy must provide assurance and long-term backing to those delivering the work.
- **Implementation:** A strategy needs to be actionable — with clear timelines, responsibilities, and mechanisms for delivery. Vague commitments won't help anyone.
- **Leadership:** The Scottish Government must be clear about how it intends to lead. That means showing how digital inclusion fits into wider policy priorities, and breaking down the silos that currently hold progress back. Leadership isn't just about setting direction — it's about owning it.
- **Evidence:** The strategy must reflect what people actually need — not just what government departments want to see. Lived experience and frontline insight need



to shape the design and delivery of any approach.

- **Accountability:** Without structures for reporting, reflection, and challenge, a strategy risks becoming another shelf document. There must be clear accountability — within government and across partners — to ensure the work stays on track.

We would welcome the UK Government taking these approaches into consideration in the future development and delivery of digital inclusion plans.

Ultimately, this is a chance to reset how we approach digital inclusion: as a shared national priority that requires clear leadership, sustained investment, and genuine collaboration across all sectors and all nations.

A decorative graphic in the bottom left corner consisting of several overlapping shapes: a red circle with diagonal lines, a grey circle with a grid pattern, a solid red circle, and a light pink circle.

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