

# Digital Inclusion Scotland

## Progress, Gaps and Pathways to Systemic Change

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### Executive Summary

In an increasingly digital world, access to technology, connectivity, and the skills to use them effectively is no longer a luxury but a fundamental enabler of participation in society.

Digital inclusion — ensuring that everyone in Scotland can benefit from the opportunities offered by the internet and digital services — has become a critical priority for building a fairer, more equitable nation.

This report examines the state of digital inclusion across Scotland, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges in an era where essential services, education, employment, healthcare, and social connections increasingly move online.

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# Executive Summary

In an increasingly digital world, access to technology, connectivity, and the skills to use them effectively is no longer a luxury but a fundamental enabler of participation in society. Digital inclusion — ensuring that everyone in Scotland can benefit from the opportunities offered by the internet and digital services — has become a critical priority for building a fairer, more equitable nation.

This report examines the state of digital inclusion across Scotland, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges in an era where essential services, education, employment, healthcare, and social connections increasingly move online.

## The Importance of Digital Inclusion

Scotland has made notable strides in digital connectivity, with around 91% of households having internet access. However, significant gaps remain. Approximately 15% of adults lack foundational digital skills — such as basic device operation, internet navigation, or password management — while 9% of households remain entirely offline.

Many more do not meet the Minimum Digital Living Standard, which encompasses adequate devices, affordable connectivity, and the skills needed for everyday life. These disparities disproportionately affect older people, those on low incomes, individuals with disabilities, rural communities, and other marginalised groups, compounding existing inequalities in poverty, health, and opportunity.

Digital exclusion is not just a technical issue; it is a social justice concern. Without adequate access and support, people face barriers to claiming benefits, attending virtual medical appointments, engaging in remote learning, or staying connected with family and community.

As public services adopt "digital-by-default" approaches, the cost of exclusion grows — in financial terms, missed opportunities, and diminished wellbeing.

## Scotland's Response

Scotland has a strong history of leadership in this area, including initiatives like the

Connecting Scotland programme, which provides devices, data, and tailored digital skills support to those most in need, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Digital Inclusion Alliance coordinates cross-sector efforts, while Scotland's Digital Inclusion Charter recognises and supports organisations committed to inclusive practices. Recent funding streams, including contributions from the UK Government's Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund, continue to back local projects and innovation.

Yet, reports from bodies such as Audit Scotland and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) warn that momentum risks stalling. Leadership, sustained investment, and coordinated action are needed to move beyond short-term programmes toward systemic change that embeds digital inclusion in policy, service design, and community support.

## **Purpose of This Report**

This report provides a comprehensive overview of digital inclusion in Scotland today. It assesses current levels of access, skills, and usage; explores the barriers faced by different communities; evaluates the impact and effectiveness of existing initiatives; and sets out recommendations for accelerating progress.

By shining a light on what works, where gaps persist, and how collective responsibility can drive solutions, the report aims to inform policymakers, public bodies, third-sector organisations, and communities.

Ultimately, true digital inclusion will help ensure that Scotland's digital future leaves no one behind — fostering a society where technology empowers rather than excludes, and where every individual can thrive in a changing nation.

# Bridging the Gap: Understanding Digital Exclusion in Scotland

In an increasingly connected world, having access to the internet and the skills to use it can feel like a basic necessity. However, for a significant portion of Scotland's population, this digital world remains out of reach.

This gap is known as **digital exclusion**, a hidden divide that prevents people from accessing essential services, opportunities, and information. The Coronavirus pandemic cast a harsh spotlight on this issue, revealing how digital inequalities can profoundly impact lives when services like healthcare and education move online.

Digital exclusion is not simply a gap in access; it is a critical social justice issue for 21st-century Scotland. This article explains what digital exclusion is, who it affects, and why it poses a major challenge for building a fair and equitable digital nation.

## What Does "Digital Exclusion" Actually Mean?

Digital exclusion is more than just not having a computer. It is a complex problem rooted in several interconnected barriers that prevent people from fully participating in the digital world. The core components include:

- **Affordability:** For many, the primary barrier is the high cost of devices and internet plans. As of 2017, over a third of low-income households in Scotland did not have any internet access, largely due to cost.
- **Access:** Even when affordable, reliable internet is not universally available. Slow internet speeds, particularly in rural areas, create a significant obstacle. Overall, 9% of Scotland's households do not have an internet connection.
- **Skills and Confidence:** Having a device and connection is not enough; people also need the skills and confidence to use them. An estimated one in every six adults in Scotland lacks the essential digital skills needed for everyday life. This can range from basic tasks like turning on a device to more complex ones like completing online forms to access public services.

The human impact of these barriers, especially on the young, is stark.

*"Many of our pupils do not have either a device or internet or both at home and as a result cannot access any learning."* — CEO of Young Carers Edinburgh

Understanding these barriers is the first step. The next is to see who is most affected by them.

## Who is Being Left Behind?

Digital exclusion does not affect everyone equally. It preys on existing societal fractures, disproportionately targeting groups that already face disadvantage and deepening existing inequalities. The key demographic groups most at risk include:

- **People in Lower Socioeconomic Groups:** A person's socioeconomic status is the single largest determinant of digital access. People experiencing poverty are among the most severely affected by all facets of digital exclusion.
- **Older People:** Older individuals are frequently identified as a key at-risk group, often facing barriers related to skills, confidence, and access to modern technology.
- **Disabled People:** Disabled individuals are another group disproportionately affected by the digital divide, facing unique challenges in accessing and using digital services.

For these groups, the consequences of being digitally excluded are not abstract; they have a tangible, daily impact on their ability to access essential services.

## The Real-World Impact on Essential Services

As Scotland digitizes its public services, the digital divide is creating a two-tier system where those with access and skills can benefit from modern conveniences, while others are left struggling with outdated and often less effective alternatives. This is especially true in healthcare and education.

### A Two-Tier System for Health and Care

As healthcare services increasingly move online, digital exclusion creates significant barriers to receiving care. While digital services offer efficiency and convenience for many, they can lock others out.

- **The 'Connect Me' Service:** A remote monitoring service supporting over 113,000 people at home for conditions like hypertension, saving an estimated 400,000 unnecessary appointments.
- **Digital Mental Health Therapies:** Provides an alternative to face-to-face sessions, receiving 74,000 referrals in the past year.

These innovations stand in sharp contrast to the challenges faced by the digitally excluded. The cost of waiting on hold for a GP appointment, for example, is a prohibitive financial burden for individuals who cannot afford high phone charges, directly linking the **affordability** barrier to healthcare access. The common practice of a GP offering to call a patient back later in the day is a significant obstacle for those with inflexible employment or caring responsibilities.

Beyond these practical issues lie profound psychological barriers. Research shows some people avoid using services because they feel like a "burden on the NHS." In a digital-first system, "more vulnerable individuals may lack the confidence, support and self-efficacy to position themselves as a candidate for care," creating a hidden barrier of self-exclusion.

## Widening the Gap in Education

The closure of schools during the pandemic brutally exposed and compounded educational inequalities. Pupils without the necessary tools or support at home fell behind, creating an attainment gap that could have lasting consequences.

1. **Lack of Access:** It is estimated that around 30% of pupils in Scotland do not have the necessary technology or internet access to complete their courses remotely.
2. **Parental Support:** Parents who have not had access to higher or further education may be less able to assist their children with schoolwork. This is often a direct result of the **skills and confidence** barrier, as they may struggle to access or understand online learning materials themselves.
3. **Low Engagement:** Even when technology is provided, engagement from pupils and their parents can remain low. This creates a risk of widening the educational attainment gap to a point that may be "impossible to reverse for some individuals."

The stark reality of a deepening divide in healthcare and education forced an unprecedented public sector response, mobilizing millions to bridge the gap. Yet, the

question remains whether this crisis-driven momentum can be sustained.

## Scotland's Response: A Story of Progress and Stalled Momentum

The pandemic spurred a major public sector effort to bridge the digital divide. The Scottish Government, working with councils and the third sector, launched several key initiatives:

- **Connecting Scotland Programme:** A £50 million investment that provided lifeline support in the form of devices, data, and skills training to 61,000 vulnerable households.
- **Support for At-Risk Individuals:** A £5 million programme targeting 9,000 at-risk individuals who were shielding, including older people and those with underlying health conditions, with technology and skills training.
- **Support for School Children:** A £9 million fund to purchase laptops, tablets, and data plans for 25,000 digitally excluded school children.

Despite this powerful initial response, momentum has slowed. According to a 2024 report from Audit Scotland, national leadership on tackling digital exclusion has weakened since the pandemic. The national digital strategy's ambition to "leave no one behind" is a worthy goal, but it currently lacks a clear action plan to make it a reality. This weakened leadership and stalled momentum are occurring precisely when significant pressures on public finances make digital efficiencies seem most attractive, creating a dangerous paradox where the drive to save money could end up costing the most vulnerable.

This stands in contrast to promising local initiatives, such as Stirling Council's free digital tablet lending library or Perth and Kinross Council's funding for digital skills training, which demonstrate what is possible with focused, place-based support.

## Conclusion: Ensuring a Digital Future for All

Digital exclusion is not a technical problem—it is a social one that reinforces and deepens the inequalities already present in our society. While digital transformation offers immense potential to improve public services, it will only be effective if it is inclusive. This requires more than just providing technology; it demands a commitment

to offering **meaningful choice**.

This principle is a core part of a wider, co-produced human rights framework for digital services in Scotland. It dictates that non-digital options must remain available and accessible without compromising the quality of care or support a person receives.

Ultimately, a digital-first Scotland can only be a fairer Scotland if it is built on a foundation of human rights. This means upholding the right to meaningful choice, ensuring non-digital pathways are not just available but are equal in quality. Without this commitment, public service reform risks becoming a vehicle for deepening the very inequalities it seeks to erase.