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Sign Up & Skill Up for a Digitally Smarter Scotland

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Tackling digital exclusion in Scotland

SCVO / August 2017

Introduction

New technology and the internet continues to radically change how we live, learn and work. Most of us find the internet an essential part of daily life. It is too easy to forget about the minority that are at risk of being left behind.

If this were just a case of missing out on a few distracting websites and celebrity tweets then we might think nothing more of it. But the stakes are so much higher. Amongst other things, the internet helps people keep in touch, learn new things, save money, find work and stay healthy. For some people, it's been a genuine life saver. These things matter to everyone, and they should be for everyone.

Supported by Scottish Government, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) leads a cross-sector response to digital exclusion through Scotland's Digital Participation Charter.

This briefing presents a summary of lessons learned through projects we have funded over the past few years, alongside a review of wider research on digital exclusion carried out by the University of the West of Scotland. The complete research and evidence library can be found at:
digitalparticipation.scot/resources

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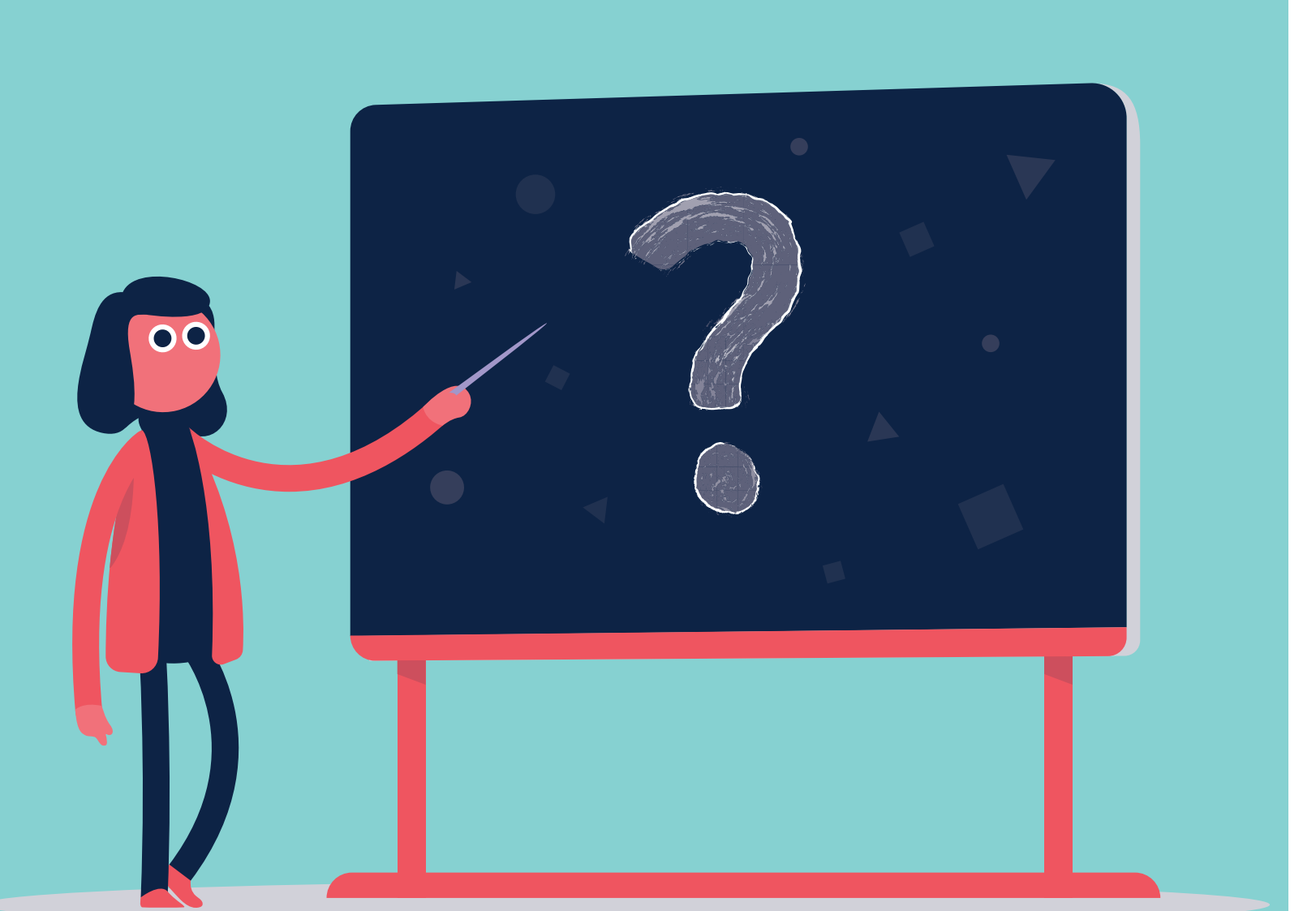
What is the digital divide in 2017?



Over the past 10 years, there has been huge growth in household internet access. The latest Ofcom statistics show that more than three-quarters (77%) of households in Scotland have access to the internet:

- Around seven in ten households in Scotland (72%) have access to fixed broadband at home.
- Almost six in ten (57%) use the internet through a mobile phone.
- 2% use the internet exclusively through a smartphone.
- 2% use the internet exclusively through mobile broadband to another type of device.

Growth has stalled. These figures remain unchanged from 2016, suggesting all those who want to be connected, can get a connection and can afford the cost, have done so.

Older people, those with disabilities and people on low incomes are most likely to be digitally excluded.

If most adults are online, what is stopping the rest? The three most common barriers are:

1. Confidence and motivation

The most common reason for not using the internet is a lack of confidence, motivation or understanding of how the internet might improve lives. 64% of those who don't use the internet think that it is "not useful or interesting".

2. Access and affordability

There is significant interest in the issue of broadband infrastructure and the Scottish Government is committed to achieving 100% superfast broadband coverage by 2021. Undoubtedly there are challenges in terms of the speed and quality of internet connections in rural communities. However, the proportional use of the internet is similar across rural and urban areas.

The more striking disparity is that people on low incomes are much less likely to use the internet. 25% of adults in Scotland's most deprived areas have reported that they do not use the internet (compared to a figure of 16% for

the rest of Scotland). The affordability of internet connections and devices is clearly an important factor influencing digital exclusion.

While smartphones are increasingly being the preferred device for internet access, they are not particularly suitable for some tasks (e.g. creating a CV). Therefore, access to another type of device is important to enable people to fully engage in the digital world.

Ofcom report that those who access the internet only through smartphones, either do so by choice or circumstance. Those who do so by choice are more likely to report having access to a desktop or laptop when required (e.g. through friends or family).

Those who are only use the internet through their smartphone as a result of circumstance (e.g. not being able to afford another device or fixed broadband connection) are less likely to have access to other devices and their connection will cost more.

Local internet access points, such as libraries, play an important role in addressing these issues. However, they are not always available within walking distance of those in some of our most deprived communities and travel may be beyond the budget of many people on low incomes.

Additionally, limits on computer time per user, lack of privacy and lack of appropriate support in local access points have all been shown to act as barriers to people being able to fully benefit from being online. Previous research suggests that supporting home use is crucial in developing confidence and skills online.

People with disabilities have traditionally had lower levels of internet use when compared to the general population, although the gap has narrowed over the past few years. Improvements in assistive technology and reduced costs have enabled more people with disabilities to go online. However, people with disabilities are more likely to face other forms of social exclusion, and therefore encounter similar barriers to others on low incomes.

3. Basic digital skills

While people may have access to the internet and use it regularly, they also require basic digital skills in order to be able to fully benefit from it. The UK definition for this foundation level highlights five key skills with a safety element underpinning each them:

- **Communicating**
- **Transacting**
- **Managing Info**
- **Problem Solving**
- **Creating**

21% of people in Scotland do not have basic digital skills. This includes people who are online, but whose use of the internet is limited, for example, to social media and messaging on a smartphone.

The profile of people who do not have basic digital skills is unsurprisingly similar to that of those who are offline. Older people, people with disabilities and people on low incomes are all more likely to lack basic digital skills.

Some of those lacking in basic digital skills spend a lot of time online but do not gain significant benefit from it. For example, while young people are commonly described as ‘digital natives’, 3% still lack basic digital skills. A study of young people not in employment, education or training in Scotland showed that they spent upwards of 42 hours per week online compared to an average of 24 hours across their peer group, yet struggled to derive major socio-economic benefit from their significant usage and remained disenfranchised in the realms of job searching, application and associated activities.

When developing basic digital skills, more fundamental issues around literacy often arise and need to be addressed first.

These issues demonstrate how top-level internet access statistics hide a deeper digital divide, particularly for low income households or people facing other forms of exclusion.

Why is it important to tackle digital exclusion?

Getting people online and developing basic digital skills in Scotland's communities is key to tackling inequalities and building a fairer Scotland.

Recent research by the Carnegie UK Trust provides evidence on why this is important. It notes that many of the groups who are currently digitally excluded could benefit disproportionality from the benefits of being online. The research recognises that while the internet and digital technology is a great enabling and empowering force, if individuals do not have the relevant access, confidence or skills, it has the potential to further exacerbate existing, deep-rooted inequalities.

With growth in use of the internet stalling, the digital divide is now narrower but deeper.

Simply providing the infrastructure to access the internet is not enough to tackle digital exclusion. There is a need to develop people's confidence and motivation to go online, ensure affordable access and equip people with the skills needed to make the most of being online.

Social benefits

The internet has clear social benefits, enabling people to keep in touch and pursue their interests and hobbies.

However, those who believe the internet is neither interesting nor useful need to be convinced of the opportunities that it offers them. With a small group of people resisting going online, primarily in the 65+ age group, there is a need to find the individual 'hooks' that show them the internet can enhance their lives. Work with these groups indicates this process happens through one-to-one conversations with people they trust, rather than 'computer experts'.

A key measure of success therefore of digital inclusion initiatives with older people is the extent to which it enhances their lives.

Many projects funded through the Digital Charter Fund over the past three years have provided case studies of individuals whose lives have been improved by developing confidence and basic digital skills.

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Economic benefits

As well as the social benefits of being online, there are strong economic benefits.

The cheapest products and services are now only available online, and those without access or skills to use the internet effectively are missing out on opportunities to save money. Research has shown that an average household saves around £750 per year by being online. Not being online contributes towards the 'poverty premium'; shorthand for the fact that lower income households often have to pay higher prices for basic necessities like gas, electricity and banking than better-off families.

There are also particular challenges around those needing to claim benefits or apply for jobs. The Department for Work and Pensions had previously created a target for 80% of JobSeekers Allowance claims to be made online by September 2013. The replacement Universal Credit service, which rolls six existing benefits (housing benefit, income support, jobseekers allowance, employment and support allowance, child tax credits and working tax credits) into one is 'digital first'. This service is going through a staged roll-out, with Glasgow being the final area in Scotland to make the transition in September 2018.

However, even the 2013 target for online access looks challenging, given those claiming benefits are also amongst the most likely to be digitally excluded. Recent evidence from a Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) survey showed:

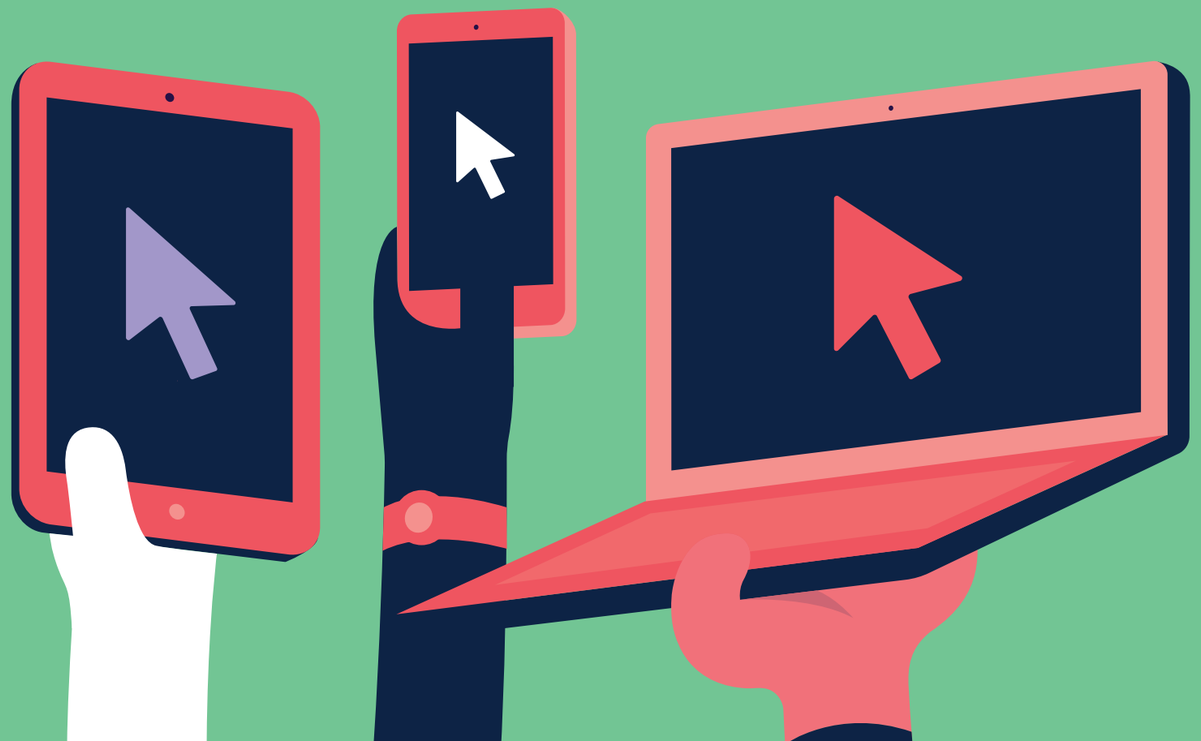
- Only slightly more than half of clients (54%) had an internet connection at home.
- 36% reported that they never used the internet and a further 11% related that they hardly ever did so.
- Only a quarter (24%) of respondents would feel confident in applying for benefits online; and
- Nearly three- quarters (72%) said that they would struggle to apply for a j ob online.

Amongst jobseekers, confidence online decreases with age, markedly from the age of 45.

Evidence from other research shows that those in receipt of benefits – and who are therefore either (or in combination) unemployed, unwell or in receipt of a low wage – are among the least likely to be able to access information and opportunities online. Given these people are most likely to need support from public services, it highlights the continuing need to consider how to build digital confidence and skills.

Additionally, with local access points, such as Job Centre Plus and libraries, being centralised or closed – the issues around affordable local access to the internet, through a range of devices, are important considerations in the future development of digital public services.

What works in tackling digital exclusion?



The evidence suggests that looking at access, confidence or skills in isolation is not enough to tackle digital exclusion. A nuanced understanding of individual, local and community barriers acknowledging a far broader scope of issues than might initially be apparent is required if interventions are to be successful.

However, common themes from projects funded through the Digital Participation Charter Fund as well as wider research include:

Confidence and motivation

Research has shown that the formula for engaging people successfully is:

- Recognising that motivation to learn something new is unique to an individual;
- Hooking people in through a personal interest;
- Facilitating invaluable peer support; and
- Embedding all of this in a service currently being accessed, when people can see an immediate practical application.

Access and affordability

- Access to the internet at home and the ability to use devices other than smartphones when needed are important considerations. The cost of purchasing a computer or affording an internet connection must be addressed alongside those of lack of confidence and skills.

Skills

- People who are least proficient are those least likely to seek support. Access to support to develop basic digital skills is also least available where it's needed most. Therefore we must be mindful of where time and resources and allocated in building basic digital skills, and ensure we reach those who need the most support. Going 'hyperlocal' has been shown the most effective way of engaging this audience. This is likely to result in higher impact.

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- Evidence from Digital Participation Charter Fund projects and other projects to build basic digital skills has shown that people learn best from repeated, informal, face-to-face and one-to-one support.

- Cross-organisation collaboration has shown to be effective in developing informal digital skills learning environments within targeted services (e.g. homelessness or mental health services).

Overall, the evidence tells us that approaches to overcoming digital exclusion must be embedded in a broader approach to tackling social exclusion.

What are we doing to tackle this?

Over the past three years, with the support of the Scottish Government, BT and European Structural Funds, SCVO has invested in supporting individuals with some of the highest levels of need to benefit from the internet.

Scotland's Digital Participation Charter has been signed by 400 organisations which have made commitments to tackle digital exclusion.

The new Scottish Government digital strategy, 'Realising Scotland's full potential in a Digital World', reaffirms its commitment to the Charter and funding local projects.

If your organisation can play a role in tackling digital exclusion, based on the evidence outlined here, we would be delighted to hear from you.

Over £1m
invested in local projects to tackle digital exclusion

127 local projects
funded across all 32 local authority areas

15,000 high-need individuals
directly supported to gain basic digital skills