A Consultation on the Digital Strategy for Scotland

We are includem

Our mission: To provide the support young people need to make positive changes in their lives, and inspire a more hopeful future for young people, their families and communities.

Our vision: A world where every young person is respected, valued, and has the opportunity to actively participate in all aspects of life and society.

We are a Scottish charity working closely with children, young people, and their families, who are facing difficult challenges in their lives. Our trust-based, inclusive model of support is centred on the needs of each young person. We help young people make positive life choices and empower them to transform their lives; creating better outcomes for young people and their communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic and digital access

Includem welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation on an updated Digital Strategy for Scotland.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed new light on the vital necessity of digital access and connectivity, with many individuals, institutions, and organisations having to rapidly adapt to digital delivery of services, support, and education.

However, the impact of the pandemic has been felt disproportionately sharply by young people and families such as those we support, who live in the most deprived areas of Scotland and experience entrenched, often intergenerational, poverty.

The discussion document pertinently notes the importance of digital access and how the pandemic has exacerbated inequality:

> [The pandemic] has also exacerbated isolation and inequality and focussed attention on the consequences of the digital divide. Digital and data skills are vital to us all, and the internet is fast becoming a basic essential in our lives. We need to ensure everyone has these skills and access.[1]

We agree wholeheartedly that we must ensure everyone has digital skills and access, including the financial resources to maintain digital connection and meet associated costs. As such, the 'No One Left Behind' section of this discussion document is of particular relevance to the work we do at includem – **all too often families such as those we support are 'left behind' and we want to see this change.**

---

[1] https://www.gov.scot/publications/renewing-scotlands-full-potential-digital-world/

The experiences of young people and families supported by includem

In May 2020, we published our *'Staying Connected'* report, which details the challenges that 150 of the young people and families we support faced in accessing digital equipment and connecting to the internet during the initial 'peak' of the pandemic.[2] Key findings from our research showed:

- **20% of those surveyed did not have access to all the devices that they need** – even for families that did have access to devices, they told us they were often shared with parents or siblings, or they did not have the confidence or knowledge to use them.
- **33% of the young people and families surveyed did not feel they would be able to afford ongoing costs** – families reported struggling to cover costs of internet access and replacing damaged devices.
- **16% of those surveyed access the internet via their mobile data** – some families told us they simply could not afford a Wi-Fi connection and accessed the internet via mobile data packages as and when they could afford them.
- **11% do not have devices with video call functionality, with 1 in 4 saying using video calling would put pressure on their data allowances** – while video calling has been widely adopted by many support services, young people and families told us they were either unable to access this function or were concerned about the impact video calls would have on their data allowance which in turn limits their participation.

To mitigate the digital exclusion faced by many of those we support, the includem Young Person's Fund[3] has provided families with devices such as laptops, tablets, chargers, mobile phones, and data packages to help them get connected. While families have told us that immediate support through this fund and wider initiatives such as Connecting Scotland and The Scottish Welfare Fund has given them temporary breathing space, we now need wider action to tackle poverty and ensure in turn that all families and young people can keep connected – particularly as the pandemic has increased financial pressures and worsened debt for many families.[4]

How can we ensure no one is left behind?

We welcome the ambition outlined in the discussion document to ensure that no one is left behind, including the following 'potential action' which commits to reducing inequalities, providing greater access to equipment and data, and working

---

[2] https://www.includem.org/resources/staying-connected-includem-digital-inclusion-report-may-2020.pdf
[3] https://www.includem.org/donate/
[4] https://www.includem.org/resources/Poverty-and-the-Impact-of-Coronavirus-on-Young-People-and-Families---Includem---Oct-2020.pdf

with the third sector to provide training and support to build confidence and digital literacy as services move online:

> Digital inclusion that tackles inequality and promotes wellbeing: We will work to ensure that moving government and other services online reduces inequalities and does not exclude the least advantaged in society from the services they may need the most. This will require us to build on the Connecting Scotland programme to provide equipment and data packages and digital skills training to those in greatest need. We will also work with the third sector and others to provide training and support to ensure that people have the skills, confidence and information literacy required to make the most of being online.[5]

Indeed, the experiences of our families outlined in our Staying Connected report[6] and, latterly, our report on poverty and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the young people and families supported by includem (October 2020)[7] demonstrate clearly the need for a holistic approach of support to end digital exclusion, which comprises tackling poverty; upholding rights; providing digital skills training – and making resources available for organisations to deliver this; ensuring the safety of both those who access and deliver services when engaging online; and clarity over financial liability for damaged equipment.

In developing a strategy that can collectively enable us to realise the vision of a Digital Scotland where 'no-one is unable to participate because of poverty'[8], where 'we use technology to promote wellbeing, and tackle, rather than reinforce, the inequalities of the analogue world'[9], and where, ultimately, no one is left behind, we wish to raise the following points of consideration.

Tackling poverty

Poverty can cause and exacerbate digital exclusion in myriad ways. From what our families have told us, we know that there are struggles in covering the costs of Wi-Fi and/or mobile data; not having the finances to replace damaged or broken devices; and worries about meeting the costs of increased electrical usage to charge devices. **Even if devices and training were made available to all, the impact of poverty will still leave people digitally excluded.**

Digital exclusion is the result, in the most part, of entrenched poverty – Scotland's children, young people and families ultimately need jobs, wages and benefits that lift them out of poverty and allow them the dignity to maintain their own social and

---

[5] https://www.gov.scot/publications/renewing-scotlands-full-potential-digital-world/
[6] https://www.includem.org/resources/staying-connected-includem-digital-inclusion-report-may-2020.pdf
[7] https://www.includem.org/resources/Poverty-and-the-Impact-of-Coronavirus-on-Young-People-and-Families---Includem---Oct-2020.pdf
[8] https://www.gov.scot/publications/renewing-scotlands-full-potential-digital-world/
[9] https://www.gov.scot/publications/renewing-scotlands-full-potential-digital-world/

digital inclusion. Without this, we may be able to mitigate digital exclusion, but we will not be able to end it.

Upholding rights

Digital access should fundamentally be viewed through a rights-based lens. Our *'Staying Connected'* report noted that, to exert and protect their rights, it is imperative that children, young people, and families can participate in decisions that affect them.[10] Families tell us that they already feel disempowered and their voices are often not heard in formal meetings and decision-making forums. This will only increase if they do not have access to devices and data that supports their participation.

An end to digital exclusion may also provide a unique opportunity to ensure that all children and young people can access their right to education. An expansion of blended and online learning schooling opportunities – beyond pandemic status – could support young people whose needs are not met through structured mainstream education, particularly those with additional support needs and those who struggle with mental ill-health in current school settings, to engage with their education.[11][12]

Many young people have told us that they have felt more able to participate in meetings and hearings about them when they have been able to attend digitally. They have said that they feel more in control and on a more equal footing when they are able to access these meetings from a location of their choice. We need to ensure that we learn lessons from what was initially introduced as a necessity and ensure that young people have the means to continue to engage digitally if this works better for them. **To respect their right to be heard we need to allow them to be heard through whatever channel they choose.**

Training and support

As detailed in our *'Staying Connected'* report, some families have reported a lack of confidence in utilising the devices they do have access to.[13] We welcome the focus in the discussion document on digital skills training and the commitment to work with the third sector to deliver this – although, **we emphasise the need to provide adequate organisational funding for third sector organisations to support this work.**

---

[10] https://www.includem.org/resources/staying-connected-includem-digital-inclusion-report-may-2020.pdf
[11] https://www.includem.org/resources/Includem-response-to-Education-and-Skills-Committee-on-vulnerable-young-people---May-2020.pdf
[12] https://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=12872&mode=pdf
[13] https://www.includem.org/resources/staying-connected-includem-digital-inclusion-report-may-2020.pdf

A crucial element of digital skills training is ensuring that children and young people, parents and caregivers, and staff who deliver services, are all supported to stay safe online. It is of paramount importance that parents, and caregivers are equipped with the requisite knowledge to keep their children and young people safe online and prevent them from being exploited.

Technology makes staff who are delivering support services more accessible: as such, consideration must be given to protecting time, but also how this increased accessibility can help to provide person-centred, relationship-focussed care by engaging with children, young people and families in a way (and on a digital platform) that suits them. However, **there must be accompanying guidance in place to safeguard both those receiving support and staff delivering it.**

Financial liability

Families have told us that on some occasions where they have been provided with equipment – for example, through their child's school – they have found there was a lack of clarity over the financial liability should the equipment be damaged. As such, some families have been reticent to use the equipment provided to them for fear that they will be damaged and, as such, be liable for the costs.

This is yet another example of the scale of financial insecurity faced by families across Scotland and how it impacts on digital access. It highlights the need for clear and easily accessible information regarding the financial liability of damaged equipment to be made available alongside the issuing of devices.

In addition**, clear plans must be put in place to prevent families facing a 'cliff-edge' of support when the digital devices they had been issued, such as tablets or laptops, reach the end of their technological lifespan**. Consideration should be given to how children, young people and families can access new devices in this instance – especially if they are no longer in contact with the service that provided them with the equipment initially. Support must be both sustainable and rights-based if we want to end digital exclusion.

Conclusion

An updated Digital Strategy for Scotland provides us with the opportunity to map out a clear route to ending digital exclusion. We support the vision outlined in the discussion document to ensure that no one is left behind – all children, young people and families, such as those we support, should be able to keep connected and, in turn, access digital services.

From what our families have told us about the barriers they faced regarding digital access a holistic approach of support to end digital exclusion is needed and must

comprise tackling poverty; upholding rights; providing digital skills training – and making resources available for organisations to deliver this; ensuring the safety of both those who access and deliver services when engaging online; clarity over financial liability for damaged equipment and a clear plan to replace devices in the future.