



## **Exploring the intricacies of a national tech support helpline**

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April 2021

### **Abstract**

This article considers the increasing importance of essential digital skills and the issue of digital exclusion in Scotland, highlighted by a move to online working, educating and socialising as a result of the pandemic. The article will focus on People Know How's response to the issue through the provision of the Scottish Government's Connecting Scotland's national technical support helpline through their Helpline project. The article intends to analyse the necessity of the Helpline by outlining the need for digital skills providers with reference to the issue of digital exclusion, and looks forward to solutions that will continue to address the issue. This article is intended as an overview of both the Helpline and the social parameters that exist that make the helpline a necessity.

### **Keywords**

Digital exclusion, digital inclusion, connectivity, data poverty, digital skills

### **Key points**

- Digital exclusion has become more apparent in the face of the pandemic.
- Essential digital skills are becoming increasingly necessary as life moves online.
- The third sector and the government must work collaboratively to create a digitally inclusive Scotland.

### Introduction

People Know How began operating Connecting Scotland's national technical support helpline in August 2020, amidst a national dialogue surrounding the increasing importance of digital inclusion as a result of the pandemic. This report will analyse the very dialogue that makes such a helpline a necessity, and explore the intricacies of People Know How's delivery of the project, including changes it has gone through since its beginning, and the challenges it has faced. Referring throughout to existing research undertaken by the government and the third sector in the exploration of data poverty in Scotland, this report aims to detail People Know How's response to this through the provision of the Helpline, and looks forward to their increasing engagement with the issue of digital inclusion in Scotland.

The Scottish Government's report "Renewing Scotland's full potential in a digital world", published in September 2020, lays a comprehensive framework for the situation surrounding digital exclusion in Scotland, and outlines attempts to combat it. The report states that "The coronavirus crisis has shown us that working digitally is more important than ever before and has driven fundamental changes, including how we work and how we interact socially. It has also shown that collaboration can achieve powerful results... This can only be delivered when central and local government work together. We are committed to doing that to ensure services are designed to meet the need of the user, cutting across boundaries between service providers... to ensure that everyone in Scotland has the skills, connectivity and devices required to fully participate in our digital nation" (Scottish Government Digital Directorate, 2020). From this, the emerging importance of digital skills and access to devices can be perceived – while the government's priority to make these skills accessible to all highlights the fundamental need to be digitally connected. Crucially, the report makes paramount the importance of the work of government and public sector organisations to combat the issue of digital exclusion in the wake of the pandemic.

In relation to this heightened recognition of digital exclusion, the government report later refers to the Connecting Scotland scheme – a scheme set up by the Scottish Government in partnership with Scotland IS, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO), COSLA, and Healthcare Improvement Scotland. The scheme aims to end digital exclusion by providing devices and getting people online, with a target of 50,000 devices provided by the end of 2021 (Connecting Scotland, 2020). People Know How operate the support helpline for the Connecting Scotland scheme – providing support and advice to those who do not have the digital knowledge to set up or use their devices distributed by the scheme. In the wake of the mounting urgency for universal digital skills, as detailed in the government report, it has been necessary for organisations to collaborate with the government to combat digital exclusion in Scotland. This report will analyse People Know How's operation of the Connecting Scotland Helpline, and examine its efforts toward ensuring that "everyone in Scotland has the skills, connectivity and devices required to fully participate in our digital nation" (Scottish Government Digital Directorate, 2020).

### Emerging necessity of essential digital skills

Before embarking upon an analysis of the intricacies of People Know How's Helpline, it is useful to first examine data relating to the emerging necessity of essential digital skills. As detailed in the introduction, being digitally competent is an increasing necessity as a result of a shift to socialising, educating and working digitally in the wake of the pandemic.

A report published by the Carnegie Trust, "Learning from a digital inclusion accelerator programme", points to the third sector's promotion of increased access to digital skills in an aim to combat digital exclusion. The report states that "As digital becomes the norm, the implications of a potential digital divide in an already unequal society increase. There is a risk that those who are digitally excluded are left behind and unable to benefit from the same opportunities as those who

are digitally skilled and engaged. As such, organisations whose overarching aim is to improve people's wellbeing are increasingly taking account of digital inclusion alongside other traditional wellbeing issues" (Cryer, 2020). Thus, the significance of People Know How's mission to provide digital skills through the provision of the helpline becomes clear, since a third sector response to reach those who are digitally excluded is a key factor in the government's attempts to combat the issue of data poverty and digital exclusion in Scotland. Accordingly, People Know How's provision of the Connecting Scotland helpline is in adherence with the third sector's promotion of increased access to digital skills in an aim to eradicate digital exclusion.

Such a response is necessary not only as a result of the increasing shift to operating digitally, but also due to the number of people who have limited digital skills in today's society. According to the Lloyd's Consumer Digital Index Report, "An estimated 9 million (16%) are unable to use the internet and their device by themselves. 16% of the UK population cannot undertake foundation digital activities such as turning on a device, connecting to Wi-Fi or opening an app by themselves" (Lloyds, 2020). Furthermore, the Lloyds report states that 48% of the population of Scotland have low or very low digital engagement (Lloyds, 2020). Such data is indicative of the necessary response on the part of the government and third sector organisations to help people improve the digital skills that have now become an essential part of everyday life.

The Digital Participation Charter released an "Essential Digital Skills" checklist, that details the digital skills required to operate on a day-to-day basis. The skills are categorised by "Communicating", "Handling Information and Content", "Transacting", "Problem Solving" and "Being Safe and Legal Online" (Digital Participation Charter, 2018). Such categorisations are suggestive of the main uses of the internet in everyday life, ranging from socialising with friends and family to online banking. As mentioned earlier in the report, such skills have become more essential in the rise of the pandemic, and People Know

How's Connecting Scotland Helpline aims to provide advice to those digitally excluded, without access to a device or foundational digital skills. Such foundational skills are detailed by the Digital Participation Charter as being able to turn on your device, being able to create and update a password, being able to connect to Wi-Fi and being able to contact family and friends online (Digital Participation Charter, 2018). As recipients of a Connecting Scotland device, it is understood that those contacting the Helpline do not possess the ability to enact these foundational skills, and this is who People Know How intend to help in the aim to eradicate digital exclusion in Scotland, by giving people the tools to help themselves become better connected.

### **Practicalities of the helpline**

Having established the contextual background of digital exclusion, and governmental and third sector acknowledgement of this, it is now worthwhile to analyse how People Know How deliver the helpline and consider its benefits as well as drawbacks.

People Know How operate the helpline in partnership with Connecting Scotland. The helpline provides phone support to those who receive a device through the Connecting Scotland programme. People Know How also delivers Connecting Scotland devices, making up some of the donated devices as part of their Computer Delivery project.

Calls on the helpline range from support for using the device to learning about the internet and how to stay safe online. The whole Connecting Scotland scheme envisioned a nationwide delivery of 50,000 devices (all of which are either a Chromebook or an iPad) by the end of 2021. The first phase of the delivery of the devices saw 9,000 devices delivered between August and November 2020. The second phase, from December 2020 to February 2021, saw 23,000 devices delivered (People Know How, 2020). The scheme still has around 19,000 devices to deliver by the end of the year to reach their target – a vast number to reach, but one that exposes the need for the provision of such devices in a bid to combat digital exclusion.

When the Helpline project first started in August 2020, there were between five and ten calls a week, with the volunteers operating the helpline learning on the job, with every call a new experience. Presently, there are an average of fifty to sixty calls per week (People Know How, 2020). It is true that the number of calls received to the helpline are representative of a small percentage of the devices out there – which could be a positive indication that less than 1% of device recipients do not possess the foundational digital skills required to use the device. However, it is worth acknowledging that with each device provided, so too is a booklet containing instructions on how to set up the device, and the contact of a “Digital Champion” to provide support for operating the device.

The helpline is there to provide initial support to users who have not been provided with this information booklet or a Digital Champion contact. Thus, People Know How are present for the initial set up stages of the device, not as a long-term solution for the provision of digital skills – this would be the job of the Digital Champions, who are trained to provide ongoing digital skills services. Interestingly, a quarter of the calls the People Know How Helpline receives are not from end users, but from Digital Champions – demonstrating that the helpline is valuable on several levels.

People Know How’s Helpline project, then, is an initial port of call for service users in the set-up of their device, and a stepping stone for further information. It is significant to note that in the first phase of the device provision, the most common issue that service users experienced was running out of data. In the first phase, 20GB of data was provided with every device monthly, for the period of a year, but this was soon altered as it became apparent through calls that this was not enough for most service users, who would run out monthly and then be unable to use their device. In the next phase, the service was amended to include unlimited data for two years, and the third phase is expected to be the same. The issue of data poverty is one of the main hindrances to digital inclusion in Scotland, as detailed in the preliminary People

Know How Digital Inclusion report: “Data is currently something that must be obtained at an ongoing cost. Devices like the MiFi provided by the Connecting Scotland scheme can provide a set amount of data for a set amount of time, but once this runs out, additional data must be purchased... Connecting Scotland has already recognised this issue, increasing the data provided for future devices to two years, however this is still a temporary solution” (People Know How, 2020). Such analysis points to the usefulness of the helpline in its ability to determine issues with the service and pave the way for further action.

Ultimately, People Know How’s Helpline project demonstrates that a little digital knowledge goes a long way for those who have minimal to no experience operating digital devices. As the Helpline functions mainly as a start-up initiative for those first receiving a device, the digital skills provided by the helpline cannot be illustrative of Scotland’s digital abilities as a whole, but certainly gestures toward a need for schemes such as Connecting Scotland and People Know How’s technical support helpline as important steps to pave the way to better digital inclusion in Scotland.

### Conclusion

People Know How’s Helpline project is indicative of a wider need in Scotland for increased access to digital skills in an attempt to combat digital exclusion – especially since the outbreak of the pandemic. In partnership with Connecting Scotland, People Know How’s technical support helpline provides a necessary and helpful service to those who are in need of it. The nature of the phone in helpline suggests that those who call want to learn and improve their digital capabilities, and this exhibits the need for an increased government and third sector response to promote digital inclusion as a fundamental human right – which has only become more prominent in the move to digital living as a result of the pandemic. People Know How’s engagement with digital exclusion throughout the pandemic period has led to the creation of their new campaign “Connectivity Now”, which calls for accessible and affordable connectivity

in homes across Scotland to facilitate an end to data poverty. As detailed in this report, one of the biggest hindrances to digital inclusion is a lack of access to devices and connectivity. Through People Know How's work with their Computer Delivery project and technical support services, and the launch of their new campaign, they anticipate sustainable solutions to eradicating data poverty in Scotland, with an emphasis on connectivity for all.

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