



HOUSE OF LORDS

The Rt Hon the Baroness Stowell of Beeston MBE
Chair of the Select Committee on Communications and Digital
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

Paul Scully MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
Department for Science, Innovation & Technology
100 Parliament Street
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19 October 2023

Dear Minister,

Thank you for the Government response to the Communications and Digital Committee's report on digital exclusion.¹

We are grateful for the time you took to engage with our inquiry and for the actions the Government has set out in its response.² We were pleased to see that you are taking some steps to address digital exclusion, for example encouraging business action; reviewing potential options for future device donation; improving adult skills training; convening Whitehall counterparts and consulting on a new strategy for libraries.

We are however disappointed at the lack of further ambition indicated by the Government response.³ It does not engage substantively with the extent of some of our concerns.

Why it matters

Digital exclusion is not going to solve itself. As our report set out, it will become increasingly difficult and costly to retrofit inclusive approaches as technological change accelerates. Some parts of society are already falling behind as digital-first approaches become commonplace. Digitised healthcare is a good example: it could generate public sector cost savings, encourage innovation, boost productivity and improve the lives of citizens. But those without skills and access risk being left behind, which risks a two-tier system while reducing the pool of potential users to support this growing industry.

Similar considerations apply to many areas of the economy as well as the Government's wider plans to make the UK a science and technology 'superpower'. There cannot be sufficient progress without addressing bottlenecks at the lower end of the digital skills supply chain and ensuring there is a long-term supply of skilled and connected consumers

¹ Communications and Digital Committee, [Digital exclusion](#) (Third Report of Session 2022–23, HL Paper 219)

² Communications and Digital Committee, [Digital exclusion and the cost of living](#) (March 2023)

³ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Government response (September 2023)



HOUSE OF LORDS

across all sectors of society. The divides between digital ‘haves and have-nots’ will deepen unless the Government takes this issue more seriously.

Political commitment

We struggle to understand why your response maintains that digital exclusion is a priority when the Government’s flagship strategy is nearly a decade old, its public-facing monitoring systems appear to have ceased, key partners no longer exist and expert witnesses throughout our inquiry deemed the strategy out of date. One of the links in your strategy invited readers to purchase the domain name of an apparently defunct website, while others refer to long-discontinued programmes.⁴ This hardly inspires confidence that this area is kept under regular review.

We note your suggestion that the principles remain relevant. But the relevance of principles is not the same as the enduring relevance of an entire strategy. Most areas of Government, for example national security and defence, have long-standing principles but regularly update their strategies and action plans. The Government’s refusal to do so for digital exclusion suggests a reluctance to dedicate political attention and departmental resource to this matter. We reiterate our conclusion: the Government’s contention that digital exclusion is a priority is not credible.

Limited response

We recommended a variety of other measures, such as cost–benefit analyses of policy interventions using Government-held data; empowering Ofcom to oversee how social tariffs are advertised to improve take-up; removing VAT from social tariffs to improve affordability; establishing a digital exclusion unit to support cross-government working; expanding internet voucher schemes to wider groups in need; and embedding basic skills targets and assessments across education life stages. We regret that the Government’s response indicated a limited appetite for these.

Next steps

We were pleased to hear that you have established an inter-ministerial group. We would be grateful for an update on the action plans for each of the departments mentioned in your response. Even so, we urge the Government to reconsider its approach to digital exclusion. As the world rapidly moves online and ground-breaking advances in AI occupy political attention, we must ensure that the UK has firm digital foundations across all sectors of society. The Government still has time to demonstrate its commitment to this issue by developing a new digital inclusion strategy. We urge you to take this opportunity.

⁴ Cabinet Office, ‘Government Digital Inclusion Strategy’ (2014): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy/government-digital-inclusion-strategy>



HOUSE OF LORDS

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State: we are clear that the Government's ambitions for the UK's technological development will not be met unless more importance is attached to ensuring everyone gains from the benefits. This must involve recognising the value of maintaining some non-digital services and addressing the risk of societal divides emerging between those who can adapt quickly to the new technological landscape and those who cannot.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Anna Stowell".

BARONESS STOWELL OF BEESTON