Digital society excludes deprived communities

Scotland's most marginalised communities being denied the opportunities offered by a digital society

Deprivation in Scotland has a far more significant effect on broadband uptake than geography or connection speeds, and extremes of digital exclusion and inclusion are much wider than previously thought, with almost one in five Scottish households in areas where most of their neighbours are likely to be offline. These are the findings of *Spreading the Benefits of Digital Participation*, the report of a major Royal Society of Edinburgh inquiry into how people and businesses in Scotland can participate in and benefit from the digital society.

The study has been truly national in scope, having gathered evidence from communities and businesses across the length and breadth of Scotland, from the Borders to the Shetland Islands. The resulting report, which is launched today, outlines where more work is needed to deliver a fair digital society and makes several key recommendations on how this can be done, whilst also highlighting some notable digital successes that have been achieved at a national, local and community level, and by the private and third sectors.

The report calls for universal digital inclusion. Current use and uptake of digital technologies across Scotland differs significantly according to socio-economic, demographic and geographical factors. The result is that people from the nation's most marginalised communities – the poor, the old and the isolated – are being denied the opportunities offered by a

digital society.

The Scottish Government deems 'universal' to be 95% or 98% of the population. *Spreading the Benefits of Digital Participation* highlights the danger this interpretation presents in allowing existing inequalities to go unaddressed. If the remaining 2% or 5% is concentrated in certain social groups or isolated locations — as the evidence and analysis uncovered by this inquiry suggests it will be — then the benefits of a digital society will not be fairly shared among those who need them most.

Chair of the Inquiry, Professor Michael Fourman, said, "The analysis we present in the report, backed up by the first-hand evidence we heard across Scotland, shows that the digital divide is wider than we thought. Figures on broadband uptake at Scottish, or even council level, mask significant variations between postcodes. In some areas, nine out of ten households are online; but there are twice as many where most households are still offline. Some of these are in very remote, isolated communities, but most are in urban areas already facing deprivation. The gap between these extremes exacerbates existing social divides, and must be seen as a priority for action."

The report recognises that the Scottish Government's Step Change infrastructure programme — which aims to make Scotland a world class digital nation by 2020 — will radically improve the nation's potential, but finds that it is still inadequate. Without further investment some 400,000 households will continue to suffer from inferior connections in 2020. In addition many vulnerable and marginalised individuals are unable to afford the devices and connections, and lack the basic skills required, to make effective use of the internet.

The report also considers the ethical and moral responsibilities of a digital society. Technology has so altered our capacity to acquire, store, process and

communicate information that a number of issues which underpin modern society must now be revisited: surveillance, anonymity, trust, copyright, privacy and freedom of speech, to name a few. The report calls on the Scottish Government to establish a framework to ensure safe and democratic oversight of the effects of digitisation on all aspects of commerce and society.

The more people who have the opportunity to participate digitally, the greater the benefit is for all. The 'network effect' means that localised digital activity by communities of individuals, businesses and voluntary organisations helps motivate others to become involved. Local community organisations have a vital role to play in encouraging and supporting people to get online, although central coordination is needed to make sure that expertise, experience and resources are shared effectively.

To share in the benefits of a digital society, every individual, business and organisation must have basic information literacy and digital skills. Currently, 1.3m people in Scotland lack these essential 21st-century abilities. Scotland must seize every opportunity to develop these skills through formal education, workplace learning, lifelong and community learning. An investment of at least £100m is urgently required for this to take place and the report calls on the Scottish Government to ensure it is made and to coordinate action involving all sectors of society.