

Accounts Commission examine local government's digital progress

The Accounts Commission has looked at the progress which all 32 Scottish councils have delivered using digital technology.

The reaction by local authorities all over Scotland has had to be stepped up mainly as a result of the pandemic. Most notably the crisis has 'demonstrated the benefits of sharing data to help solve a problem and inform decisions quickly'. And the report mentions the councils using CivTech to help them find online solutions to practical problems. [CivTech](#) is an alliance set up in Scotland using technology to make people's lives better.

There has been some progress, but the commission has decided that there must be greater collaboration, citizen engagement and planning to get the best out of the available digital technology.

Councils are at different stages of transforming their services to an online base. They have in the main responded to the pandemic by enabling their staff to work from home, but they need to look at the skills which their staff now need to provide services in a better way.

Careful planning is advised to avoid widening existing inequalities.

The Accounts Commission report includes what they expect from

a digital council – where you can pay or investigate council services online rather than in person. They have also examined some councils in depth, but have found that few have a dedicated council committee with a remit for digital transformation.

The way this transformation is paid for is affected by councils moving to a cloud based system – which means it is paid for out of the Revenue budget. If councils retain their own databases on their own computer systems then that is paid for out of the capital budget. While this move to the cloud reduces capital spending it puts a strain on day to day revenue spending, already under strain.

On a practical level it is essential that by moving services and access to them online that councils do not leave anyone behind. It is recognised that many communities and individuals just don't have access to a suitable device to engage with the digital services.

The commission makes it plain that The Scottish Government and COSLA are working to drive digital transformation but this will have to be coupled with strong leadership and national coordination if a consistent vision and clear direction are to be achieved.

Andrew Cowie, member of the Accounts Commission said: “Now is the time for clear and decisive strategic planning with the refresh of Scotland's national digital strategy. It is an opportunity that has to be seized to ensure there is a vision for digital transformation across all councils, with shared priorities, skills and knowledge.

“Councils have worked hard to increase the pace at which digital technology has been introduced due to Covid-19, enabling many vital services to continue. Now all councils must focus on putting all citizens at the heart of digital service design, empowering communities to thrive, not just

survive.”