Executive summary

Simon Community Scotland

Get Digital Scotland

Get Connected

I feel part of society

The personal impact of digital inclusion for people with experience of homelessness

With support from

Scottish Government gov.scot

Good Things Foundation

An overview of Get Digital Scotland and our Get Connected 500 Project

Introduction

Get Digital is Simon Community Scotland's digital inclusion programme. We nurture and resource the digital capability of Scotland's homeless sector through training, support and tools.

We want people affected by homelessness to experience an improved quality of life by benefiting from the digital world.

Through our Get Connected Model we provide a digital device (phone or tablet), unlimited data (for one year), a learning framework and personalised support from a trained Digital Champion to people who know the realities of homelessness.

This report describes our approach to digital inclusion and the life changing impact we are able to help achieve for people.

Every step in our Get Digital journey brings us closer to a more inclusive and connected world, where people experiencing homelessness have the tools and support they need to make positive change in their lives.

"This project helped me to discover a new world where I can feel connected. I am happy to be able to speak to my friends."

Great need

With approx 29,000 open homelessness cases in Scotland, what more can we be doing to ensure each of to ensure each person is digitally included?

Tried and tested solutions

Join us as we support more people to stay connected to loved ones and access what they need through our Get Connected model (See page 3 for details).

We are grateful to all of our funders, including the Scottish Government and The Good Things Foundation

This allows delivery partners and the people we support to engage at no cost to them – removing barriers and making digital inclusion possible.

Together we can help overcome the systemic drivers that lead to homelessness

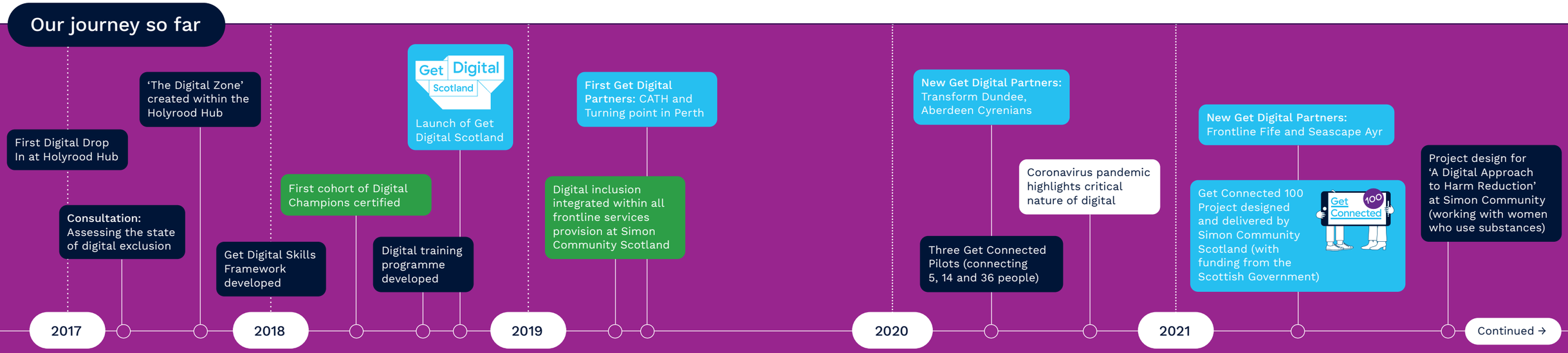
Contents

Foreword 1
Executive summary 2
Get Digital Scotland 3
What we've been doing 5
What we've been seeing 8
What we are learning 9
What now 10
Gratitude and thanks 11
People we support 12

"The work of Simon Community Scotland to include people experiencing homelessness in digital provision, co-funded by the Scottish Government, is invaluable. I welcome this report, which shows that by providing access to digital devices, coupled with support on how to use them, people who are often excluded are given the opportunity to re-connect with friends and family, live fuller lives independently, and with dignity."

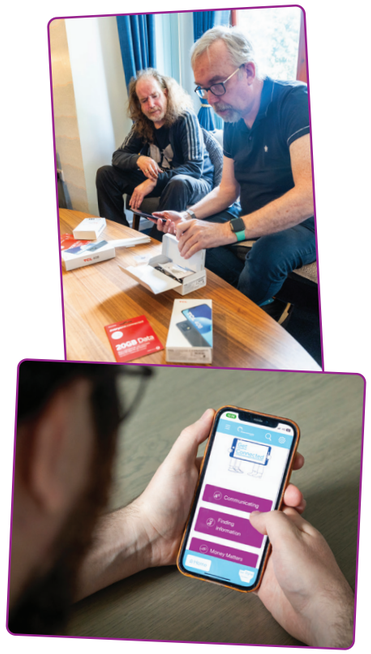
Paul McLennan MSP, Minister for Housing

Our journey so far



Foreword

A word from Simon Community Scotland CEO Lorraine McGrath



“To date over 1000 people experiencing homelessness have been supported by this life-changing programme with tailored support, a phone or tablet and unlimited data.

People have been able to connect, some for the first time, with the services and support they need, with loved ones, and gain skills and confidence.

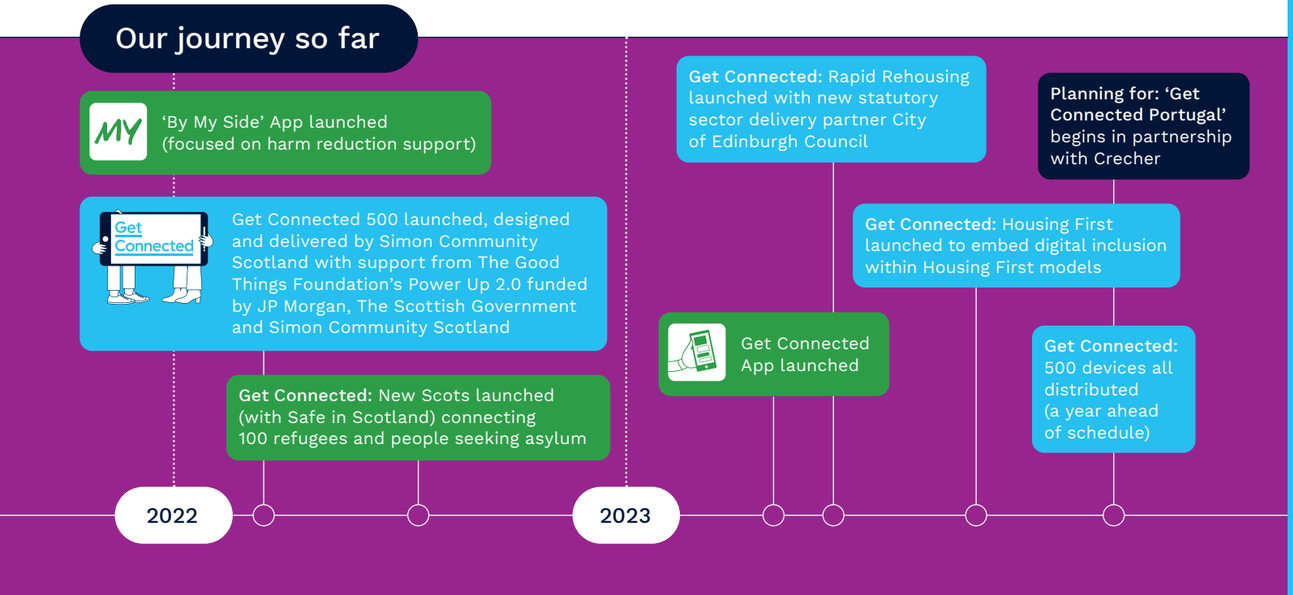
We are learning all the time and we have bold plans to support many more people to have experiencing homelessness to be able to use digital access to change and transform their lives for the better.

Every person’s life and experiences are unique as are the ways they choose to benefit from the digital world. Its remarkable to see the range of ways people choose to use this simple but vital access to bring positive impacts into their lives.

I hope for the day that digital exclusion for people experiencing homelessness is a thing of the past. I am proud of the work that has been done to move us towards that aim but there is so much work still to do, and I look forward to Simon Community Scotland continuing to lead on ending digital exclusion within homelessness in Scotland.”

Lorraine McGrath,
CEO Simon Community Scotland

Our journey so far



Executive summary

Why digital inclusion matters

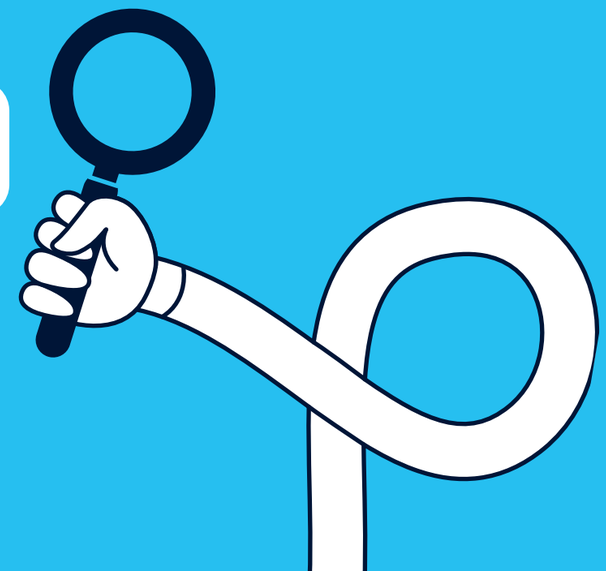
Digital inclusion: A journey out of homelessness

Day-to-day life is increasingly enabled through digital platforms. We use digital to connect with friends and family, access health care and information, enjoy music, games and movies, manage our finances, learn things, work and do our shopping.

Yet many people who have experience of homelessness, do not have access to the digital world – they are some of the most digitally excluded groups in our society.

This places people who are already experiencing trauma and significant difficulties, at a severe disadvantage. Being disconnected from loved ones, and the support they need, makes it almost impossible for them to address and overcome the challenges of homelessness.

“It’s been life changing – I feel part of society.”



Get Digital Scotland

An overview of our digital inclusion programme

Bridging the digital divide makes the most amazing difference to the lives of people who know the harsh realities of homelessness.

Digital inclusion means that people are able to help themselves. Nobody wants to ask for help, or depend on staff to help them. Effective digital inclusion means that people are empowered to find solutions to their challenges themselves, which in turn develops their confidence, independence and sense of self-worth and self-belief.

Get Connected for a better life

People FEEL differently, People THINK differently, People ACT differently

Simon Community Scotland

Get Digital Scotland

How we do it

Built on an approach that places the people we support at the centre

- People at the heart
- Trauma informed
- Establishing relationships of trust
- Learning and adapting

"I'm more connected to myself and my world, exploring things that are useful, interesting and enjoyable for me."

"I'm more connected to my people and communities. Staying in touch with people that matter to me."

"I'm more connected to services and things I need, able to access services and be proactive around what I need."

"I'm more connected to support that works for me, engaging more easily and regularly with my support worker."

What we are learning

1. It starts with empathy – put people first
2. Embed digital support within existing relationships of support
3. Digital inclusion is a gateway to wider inclusion and needed support
4. Digital inclusion enables citizens to influence wider change
5. Invest in and build on cost-effective models that work

Make it easy • Make it right • Make it happen

What we've been doing

Leading the way in digital inclusion

Being digitally included opens up a world of opportunities for people. We have also seen how it increases confidence, connection, autonomy, control, learning, health and wellbeing. This is why digital inclusion has become so pivotal to our approach at Simon Community Scotland.

Our national Get Digital Scotland Programme works across Scotland supporting people experiencing homelessness to get online and benefit from the digital world. The programme is delivered through Simon Community services and other homelessness service providers across Scotland – at no cost to themselves.

This is possible thanks to funding and support from a wide range of organisations including the Scottish Government, Simon Community Scotland and the Good Things Foundation. Influencing and inspiring partners globally and domestically, we have been leading the way in digital inclusion in Scotland's homelessness sector.

1,000
devices distributed since 2020

97%
of people feel more connected with friends and family

People at the centre: How we work

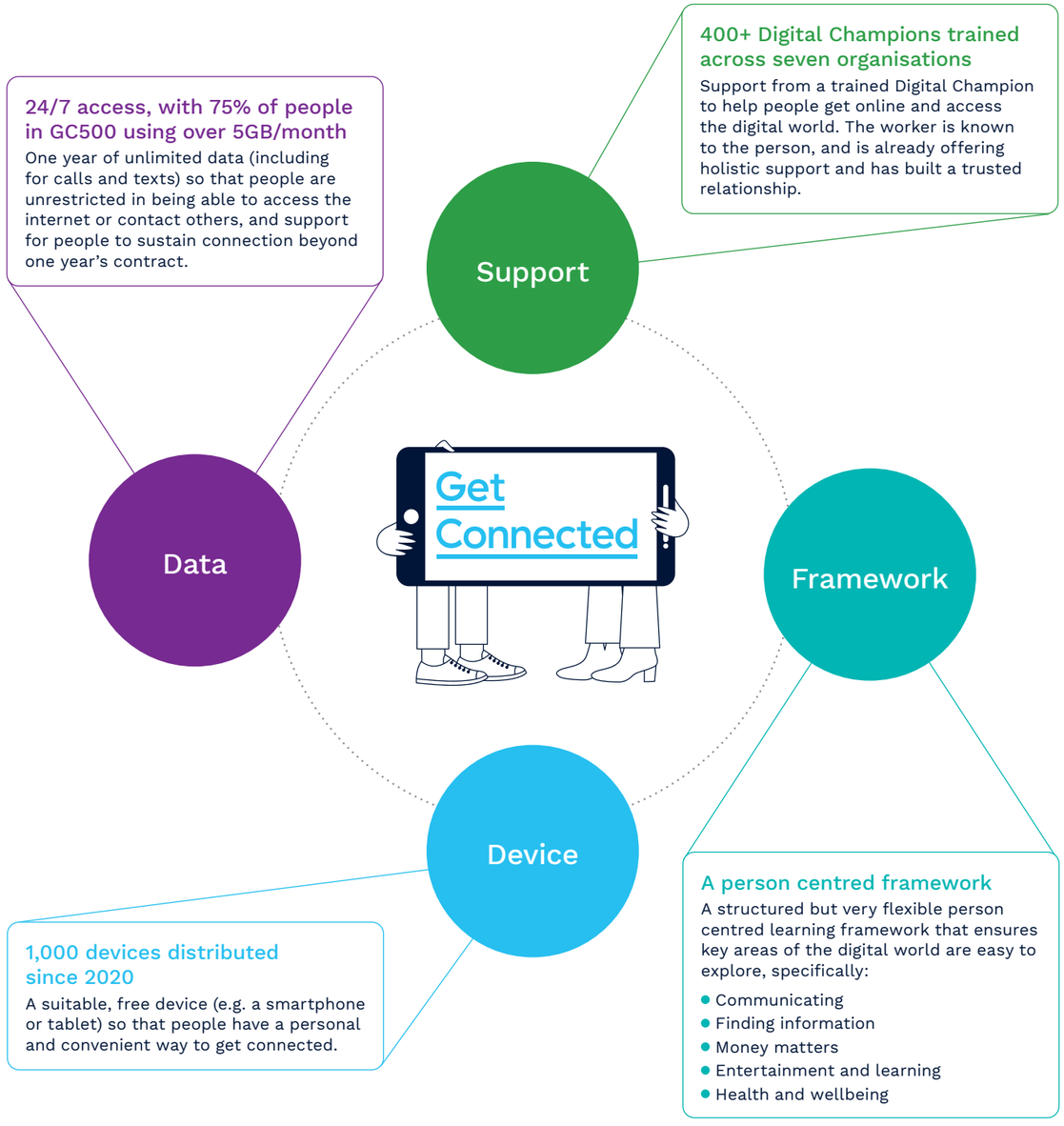
Effective digital inclusion places people at the heart – it starts with relationships.

For people with experience of homelessness, a trauma informed approach must underpin everything we do, so that we can establish safe places for people to access support and heal. By rooting the work in existing relationships of trust, we can quickly support people with what works best for them. Reviewing, learning and adapting enables us to reach more people and tailor solutions for what people really need.

"I enjoy the self regulation, access to wellbeing groups, mental health in the community."

Delivering a model that works

Our Get Connected Model is how we enable digital inclusion for people affected by homelessness. There are four interrelated components that each address practical barriers and personal challenges that people face.



24/7 access, with 75% of people in GC500 using over 5GB/month

One year of unlimited data (including for calls and texts) so that people are unrestricted in being able to access the internet or contact others, and support for people to sustain connection beyond one year's contract.

400+ Digital Champions trained across seven organisations

Support from a trained Digital Champion to help people get online and access the digital world. The worker is known to the person, and is already offering holistic support and has built a trusted relationship.

1,000 devices distributed since 2020

A suitable, free device (e.g. a smartphone or tablet) so that people have a personal and convenient way to get connected.

A person centred framework

A structured but very flexible person centred learning framework that ensures key areas of the digital world are easy to explore, specifically:

- Communicating
- Finding information
- Money matters
- Entertainment and learning
- Health and wellbeing

What we've been doing (continued)

We first piloted Get Connected at the start of the pandemic in 2020 when it was clear that people needed to be digitally connected to get vital access to health information and other services.

We started this work in Simon Community services, and now work with a wide range of homelessness service providers across Scotland. These include: Aberdeen Cyrenian, Dundee Transform, Turning Point Perth, CATH (Perth), Frontline Fife, Seascape (Aryshire) and the City of Edinburgh Council (Rapid Rehousing team). Our training and advocacy partners are the Mhor Collective.

Through this network of partners and with the support of funders, we have been able to expand the number of people we have been able to support. The funding allows us to support our delivery partners with free training, consultancy and evaluation.

"Additionally, it means we can give people free hardware (i.e. devices) and one year's connectivity. Doing this ensures we remove any further barriers for both the service providers and the people we support, making it possible for organisations to embed digital inclusion within their local context."

In November 2023 we were proud to give out our 1,000th device, marking a significant milestone in this approach.

We have also been able to adapt the model to reach people who have different kinds of lived experience including people in Housing First situations, refugees and those seeking asylum, women who use substances and those using statutory 'Rapid Rehousing' services.

What we've created

We now also have two apps:

Get Connected

Our Get Connected app provides easy access to our learning framework that contains evidence based content and useful links, co-produced with people we support.

The app helps people using digital for the first time in our 'Let's get started' section and provides crucial information around staying safe when online.

By My Side

The By My Side app is an award-winning harm reduction app co-developed by women supported by Simon Community Scotland and directly addresses the challenges people face in gaining access to the right information.

The app initially focuses on advice to prevent drug-related harm, but is now home to wider resources such as mental health guidance, support for those affected by domestic or sexual violence, and information for managing sexual health. Seeing the person first, and not just their drug use is critical.

What we've been seeing

Since launching in 2020, our Get Connected model has been delivering incredible results for people. The life-changing impacts from our recent Get Connected 500 (GC500) project are summarised below.

People speak about their lives being significantly changed – life becomes easier and better because they are more connected to things that really matter to them. There are four areas where people feel more connected:

Because of GC500, I feel more connected to...

Myself and my world

Exploring things that are useful, interesting and enjoyable for me.

- More skills
- Confidence and wellbeing
- Signing up to courses
- Enjoying music, films and other entertainment
- Learning new things

80% accessed digital tools to improve health and wellbeing

"I enjoy the self regulation, access to wellbeing groups, mental health in the community."

"The support I received has helped me with my self confidence."

My people and communities

Staying in touch with the people that matter to me.

- Staying in touch with friends and family
- Re-establishing connection with loved ones – including those far away

95% (118 people) feel less lonely

"The best thing has been establishing links to my family and friends. I didn't have this before."

"I am now able to keep in touch with support agencies and not miss appointments as most of them are online."

Support that works for me

Engaging more easily and regularly with my support worker.

- Easy to stay in touch
- More connection builds trust
- Digital and wider support tailored to what someone needs

98% felt the Digital Champion support was helpful

Services and things I need

The ability to access services and be proactive around what I need to get on in life.

- Housing services
- Benefits
- Health services
- Shopping
- Utilities

78% feel their housing situation is better

Overall, people tell us how the Get Connected project is changing their lives – they feel, think and act differently:

- **Feeling valued, respected and part of society**
- **Having a sense of control and taking steps to improve life**
- **Learning new things and doing things that are enjoyable**
- **Accessing health, housing and financial services**
- **Improved physical and mental wellbeing**
- **Having more hope for the future**

People are amazing, and with a digital inclusion model that works, astonishing achievements are possible for the people we support.

Digital inclusion means that people can help themselves. Nobody wants to ask for help, or depend on staff to help them. Digital inclusion can mean that people are empowered to find solutions to their challenges themselves, which in turn develops their confidence and sense of self-worth and self-belief.

What we are learning

The five themes below summarise insights from our Get Connected approach and why it matters.

1 It starts with empathy

Everyone deserves respect and needs connection – including and especially in digital spaces.

This is all the more important for someone who has experienced trauma, stigma and exclusion. Giving people the right tools with the right support enables autonomy and helps to rebuild confidence and self worth.

2 Embedded digital support

Embedded digital support within wider relationships of support.

Those who have an existing relationship of support are best placed to offer digital tools and companionship to help someone become more digitally included. When individuals receive this model of support it can be best aligned to their unique needs, and they can achieve remarkable outcomes that enhance their lives.

3 Creating a gateway

Digital inclusion is a gateway to wider inclusion and needed support.

With the right device, unlimited data and tailored support people are – very quickly – more socially included and are able to take actions that begin to address the barriers they face in other areas of life.

4 Influencing change

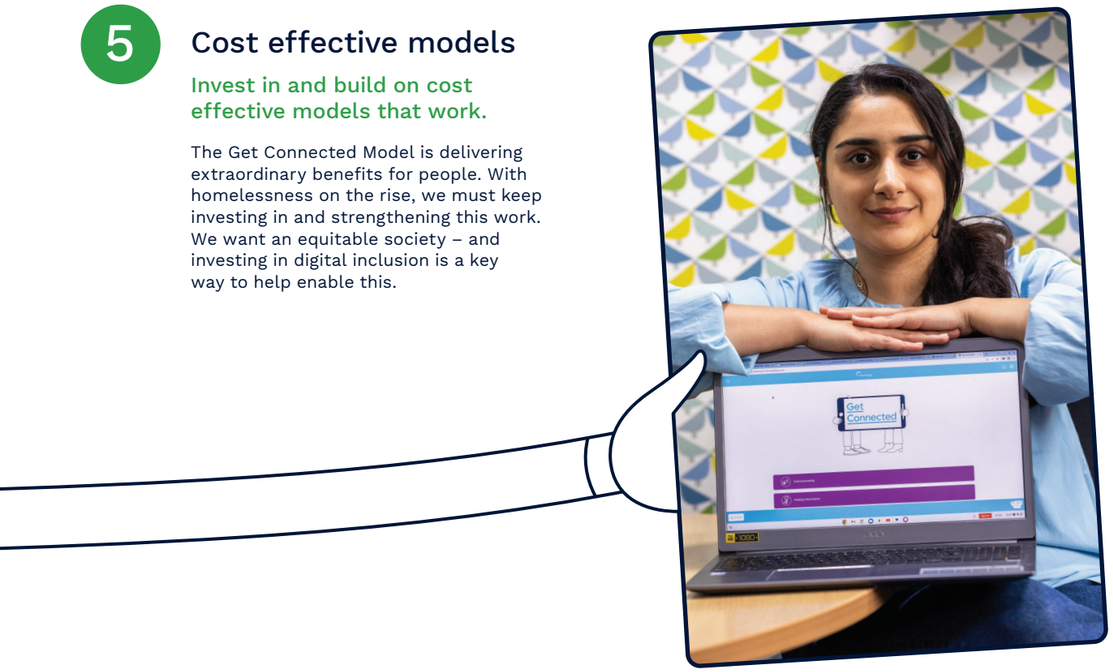
Digital inclusion enables citizens to influence widespread change.

Not only are digitally included people better able to advocate for themselves (e.g. sending an email to their GP or bank), they can also influence wider change (e.g. through online consultations). Additionally we are able to create opportunities for national and local leaders to hear directly from those who are most affected by homelessness and digital exclusion, so that they design better policies and services.

5 Cost effective models

Invest in and build on cost effective models that work.

The Get Connected Model is delivering extraordinary benefits for people. With homelessness on the rise, we must keep investing in and strengthening this work. We want an equitable society – and investing in digital inclusion is a key way to help enable this.



What now?

By building on the Get Connected model we can achieve widespread change for people who know the harsh realities of homelessness and overcome some of the systemic drivers that lead to homelessness. We continue to refine our model.

We are currently strengthening the health and wellbeing components of our learning framework because we are worried that the rapid advances in tech-enabled healthcare could mean that many people are left behind, unable to access potentially lifesaving services. We are finding other ways to continually adapt our apps and approach to suit a wider range of people.

Ending digital exclusion requires a joined up approach built around collaborative working and partnership across all sectors. We are passionate about sharing our experience and knowledge throughout Scotland and beyond so that our learning can influence wider change.

We participate in a range of national stakeholder forums to provide advice and support for policy and programme development. This includes Scottish Government programmes (e.g. Connecting Scotland, the Scottish Digital Alliance and Digital Lifelines), as well as the National Care Service. Through this work we are able to give a vital 'line of sight and connection' to the people we are all here to support.

Join in and help change lives for the better

Get Digital Scotland

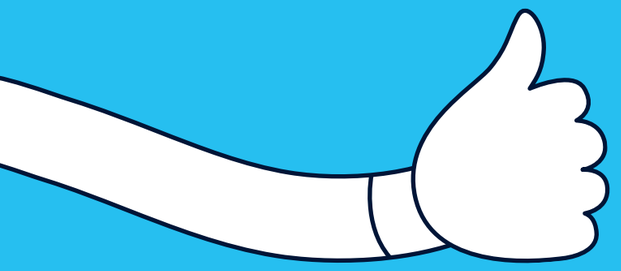
With the cost of living crisis, homelessness is affecting more people in Scotland (over 39,000 people in 2023) and the challenges are getting greater.

We need more people to help fund and partner with us to expand this work. We want to reach more people with an approach that works. When people are digitally included, remarkable, life-changing things can happen.

getdigitalscotland.org/get-involved

The life changing impacts we've seen have been possible because of the wide range of people and organisations working together. We are so grateful for everyone who has brought their time, energy, resources and expertise to support us in making this happen.

Gratitude and thanks



People we support

Our Get Digital work is for the people we support and what has been achieved would not be possible without these tenacious, brave and remarkable people who are facing the most enormous challenges every day. They have shaped this work and continue to show us how we can do better. Thank you. You are amazing.

Our Digital Champions across Scotland

Frontline staff in a range of organisations are the ones to deliver digital inclusion support day-to-day.

They continue to grow their own skills and build relationships with people, so that lives can be better. You truly are champions. Thank you for what you do.

Awards and recognition

People we support are the reason why we do what we do, in the way we do it. We are proud that the impact of our digital inclusion work is being recognised across the sector.

SCVO Scottish Charity Awards 2023
The Digital Citizen Award for our Digital Approach to Harm Reduction project

Herald Digital Transformation Awards 2023
Commendation for the Get Connected model

Scottish Digital Health and Care Awards 2022
The Scottish Digital Inclusion Award for our Digital Approach to Harm Reduction project

SCVO Scottish Charity Awards 2022
Commendation for Get Connected 100

Our partners

We are so grateful for all the organisations who help to make this work possible.

Get Digital Delivery Partners (homelessness service providers):
Simon Community Scotland (lead partner)
Aberdeen Cyrenian
Dundee Transform
Turning Point Perth
Cath (Perth)
Frontline Fife
Seascape (Ayrshire)
City of Edinburgh Council
(small trial ongoing to embed our Get Connected Model within Rapid Rehousing services)

Supportive suppliers
DB Comms (2020-2023)
Vodafone (since 2023)

Training and advocacy partners
Mhor Collective

Corporate partners
AND Digital (since 2021)

We'd like to give a special thanks to our friends at Mhor Collective and And Digital for all of their support in delivering our Digital Inclusion Work.

Funders

Join us to make a difference

The journey continues. As long as there are people facing the challenges of homelessness, the need for being proactive around digital inclusion remains. Join in. Help change lives for the better.

Partner with us
Let's share ideas for how we can make a bigger difference.

Learn more about our approach
Listen to our podcast, invite us to speak to your team, follow us on social media for updates.

Share best practice with others
So more people can adopt this effective, life-transforming Get Connected approach.

Get Digital Scotland

Simon Community Scotland
472 Ballater Street, Glasgow G5 0QW

T: 0131 344 0825
getdigital@simonscotland.org

@GetDigitalScot

getdigitalscotland.org

Get Digital Scotland are proud to be part of Simon Community Scotland.
Charity Registered in Scotland No. SC003076. Limited Company No. SC137419