‘Scotland’s Digital Future – Infrastructure Action Plan’ is a welcome acknowledgement by the Scottish Government of the need to improve Scotland’s digital infrastructures. It recognises the widespread socio-economic potential benefits associated with digital infrastructures, from the ability to access online resources to improving how services are delivered to laying the foundations for future innovative activity. The broad scope of the plan reflects the need to co-ordinate multiple interested parties to achieve the various objectives.

While the sentiments expressed in the plan are welcome, it raises several practical questions. The plan talks about addressing the digital divide in areas where the market currently does not serve (page 9), and mentions that 30% of premises are unlikely to be provided for by the market (page 10). Setting aside the fact that it is not clear how this figure was arrived at, further thought is required regarding the relationship between the market and the state within the context of an uncertain but changing sector. Should the state complement and support the market so that it delivers the required digital infrastructures or replace it and more actively intervene in their provision?

The target speed of 40-80Mbps (page 13) would be an improvement for many in Scotland, but it does not have the same inspirational dimension as copying Sweden and saying that everyone should have access to 100Mbps services by a date in the near future. Sweden is where it is today in terms of its digital infrastructure due to decisions taken and large investments made over many years. While lessons can be learnt from their experience, they need to be translated into the Scottish context. Scotland is playing catch up to improve its digital infrastructure in a relatively short period of time, but it is not clear whether the sums of money mentioned in the plan are anywhere near sufficient for the task at hand.

The benefit to be derived from the money that is available can be maximised through the careful co-ordination of activities and resources. In this respect, the governance and delivery structure (page 25) is crucial. It must work, be nimble and be accountable. It must also reflect the full range of stakeholders – network operators, content providers, innovators, users etc. – ensuring that everyone’s voice is heard in the debate so that progress towards achieving the various targets can be made. There is, however, very little information about this structure in the plan. The remit and structure of the various elements of the governance and delivery structure needs to be urgently clarified.

Digital infrastructures are a means to an end. If their benefits are to be realised then a more extensive and ambitious digital engagement plan is needed than that in programme 4 (pages 20-23). The ‘usual suspects’ of engagement are mentioned – the role of education and public services in driving adoption, how uptake differs demographically and a few isolated examples of businesses being encouraged to go online. But what about those who are interested but cannot afford or who fall outside one of the usual engagement mechanisms? The portfolio of any skills that are provided will also require constant upgrading as technologies change, which presumably means that long term funding for whatever engagement programme is implemented is required.

The plan is a step in the right direction, but more thought is required to turn the plan into a credible programme of action that delivers the digital infrastructure Scotland requires and deserves.