

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Pensioner poverty - digital exclusion

Written Submission by CILIPS, 26 February 2025

CILIPS thanks the committee for the invitation to share our written submission and your welcome recognition of the unique role that Scotland's libraries can play in empowering people, particularly those of pension age, to develop their digital skills, confidence and connectivity with the support of trained and trusted professionals.

Digital Ethics in Trusted Spaces

Working in libraries of all sectors across Scotland, our 1,100+ members are committed through the [CILIP Ethical Framework](#) to work for the public benefit, upholding human rights as we champion information literacy grounded in impartiality and confidentiality. With these ethical foundations in mind and as signatories to [Scotland's Digital Inclusion Charter](#), we wholeheartedly endorse a human-rights approach to tackling digital exclusion. As a profession, we seek to deliver the [Scottish Government's digital strategy](#)'s recommendation of 'supporting people at point of need': understanding that a library patron's first approach or request for support can serve as the foundation for longer-term and more comprehensive digital upskilling, with tailored support from trained library staff key to this transformation.

Librarians are consistently recognised as amongst the most trusted professionals in the UK, and we know it is the relationships we form with our communities that create the conditions through which the desire for digital inclusion becomes a reality, especially for those chronically excluded from the digital world for years or even decades. As the [International Federation of Library Associations \(IFLA\)](#) notes:

'The library can be really effective in creating a *safe space* for tech learning and exploration for older users. This can help with facing their own fears and anxieties around breaking a device or making a mistake, boosting their self-confidence and comfort with tech – including through supportive relationships with the instructor and fellow learners. Perceptions of comfort and safety of a library digital skills training can therefore be really valuable in helping bypass ageist beliefs, whether societal or even internalised.'

Key Case Studies

Combined physical and digital visits to Scotland's public libraries increased from 32 million in 2022-23 to over 40 million in 2023-24. Our branches are regularly described as the beating hearts of their local communities, offering what is often the

only non-clinical, non-commercial space left for pensioners to combat isolation. We can share several examples of library staff advancing digital equity for those of pension age in creative and innovative ways:

- Pre-pandemic, [Moray Libraries](#) were already hosting weekly IT Help Hubs for pensioners ‘to come along for support in using their own digital devices and learning new skills’, although ‘this very quickly developed into a social occasion with coffee and cakes’! During lockdown, this popular service moved online, with library staff supporting attendees to download the required software onto their devices. The Help Hub soon became a vital source of social support during lockdowns, as well as achieving its original aim of increasing digital inclusion by developing attendees’ skills and confidence.
- In partnership with colleagues from Renfrewshire Libraries and the University of the West of Scotland, the East Renfrewshire Libraries project [Virtually Together](#) explored how virtual reality can be used to tackle loneliness: offering older people free, ‘jaw-dropping’ access to cutting-edge technology in a safe, shared environment. This project offers a particularly strong example of how library spaces are uniquely equipped to not just support pensioners with foundational skills but also deeper digital inclusion, increasing their familiarity with innovative technology as a means of fun, reminiscence and connection. Indeed, the 2024 Association of Public Libraries in Scotland Poverty Survey found that 91% of public libraries are Dementia-Friendly Libraries, offering reminiscence and Memory Scotland sessions that combine digital activities with in-person support.
- Since 2016, more than [21,000 people](#) have been helped by Dundee Libraries and Dundee’s Digital Support, Databank and Device Bank projects to develop IT skills and access resources through kits, classes and clubs delivered by library staff. Their case study notes that pensioners are not just well-represented as users but also as volunteers, reflecting the value of digital inclusion as a gateway to broader community participation.
- [South Ayrshire Libraries](#) partner with Voluntary Action South Ayrshire to run digital support drop-ins, as well as offering free access to newspapers and magazines from across the UK and around the world via PressReader. Through their Stay Connected project, they are planning intergenerational community sessions throughout 2025 on staying safe online, cybersecurity, how to shop online safely, and health literacy.
- At the recently renovated [Elder Park Library](#) in Glasgow, the library team hosts busy digital skills classes that staff describe as ‘especially helpful for older people’.
- Recognising the devastating impact of the cost-of-living crisis on pensioners, [Midlothian Libraries’ Warm and Well hubs](#) complement their free wifi and drop-in information sessions on how to access financial and wellbeing support online with physical steps to tackle social exclusion like games, free soup and hot drinks, and a coat swap for the cold weather.

- Supported by the Public Library Improvement Fund and showcased in [Forward - Scotland's Public Library Strategy 2021-25](#) (p26), North Ayrshire Libraries launched an Open Data project to engage citizens in applications of publicly accessible information and data sets. 'Data Stories' events in local branches attracted 250 participants up to the age of 90, discovering how to access, understand and use Open Data to inform themselves about themes including recycling and accessibility.
- As also highlighted in *Forward* (p37), public libraries across Scotland offer digital skills training and access to digital resources like 3D printers, supported by a network of trained Digital Champions. Comprised of representatives from all 32 local authorities in Scotland, this professional peer-to-peer network helps to implement the strategic aims of *Forward* and meets regularly to share innovative ideas for tackling digital exclusion.
- 3000 people of all ages attended the [South Lanarkshire Libraries 'digital roadshow'](#), which visited hospitals, care homes, community centres and other venues to introduce the wide range of digital services available for free through local libraries.
- Free wifi is available in every library in Scotland, along with free online access to digital newspapers and magazines. Libraries also provide community access to digital tools like printers, scanners, and assistive technology, with 84% offering charging points for personal devices like phones and laptops (The Association of Public Libraries in Scotland).

Deepening Digital Literacy

We note Independent Age's expert contribution to the recent roundtable recognising that one of several causes of later life poverty is 'people not receiving their financial entitlements', with 'only around 65% of eligible households receiv[ing] Pension Credit'. If increased to 100%, their research suggests that this alone could reduce the number of pensioners in poverty by around one-third. Echoing Audit Scotland's statement that 'public bodies often underestimate the level of digital support people need', we therefore see digital inclusion as inextricably linked to what our profession calls *digital literacy*: equipping pensioners not only with devices and data but with the knowledge, skills and confidence to more fully participate in the world that this very technology is designed to place at their fingertips. This seems particularly pressing when plans are in place for outrolling new benefits, such as the Pension Age Winter Heating Payment from winter 2025/26. To not only avail themselves of existing sources of support but also stay informed about new ones in the future, pensioners require an accessible, trusted and empathetic environment in which to develop and consolidate their digital skills. We believe that Scotland's libraries are the key to their digital inclusion.

Kirsten MacQuarrie, CILIPS Sector Development Manager, February 2025