



Digital Inclusion

Background

Digital inclusion is a new frontier of poverty. It is about more than simply owning a computer or smartphone. It is about using online and digital technologies to access employment, education, training, commerce and government services - and to enhance quality of life. The digital divide refers to the exclusion of those who are not digitally connected and will compound other areas of socio-economic disadvantage as more people, government and business services, and cultural interactions shift online.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index¹ measures the personal use of digital technologies, reporting scores in relation to access, ability and affordability. Alarming, South Australia consistently rates below the national average and is the second worst performing state or territory in Australia, behind Tasmania. Digital inclusion is increasing overall but the fact that South Australia remains behind the rest of the country has implications for our community and our future economic performance. We have an opportunity to address digital inclusion now and ensure that all South Australians can participate in our technologically driven society, or we risk leaving many people behind.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced more interactions and services online. It has highlighted the potential to reach more people in more ways, but also how far those who are digitally excluded will fall behind. In 2020, the lowest income households in South Australia scored 18.4 points below the average digital inclusion score for the state². Similarly, SACOSS' research on waged poverty³ highlights exclusion issues and that digital technology is becoming crucial for a wider range of jobs – including those not traditionally seen as part of the digital economy like retail, nursing, delivery, and social work.

Policy Response

The SA government's last budget included a \$120m investment in a Digital Restart Fund to improve government ICT and the public's digital service access. This is a significant investment in government's digital capacity and may improve government public interface. However, the scope of the Digital Restart Fund is limited as it does not ensure that citizens have access and skills to use the technologies and take advantage of improved government platforms. There are clear examples from other states where government digital investment

¹ Thomas et al, (2020) [Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020](#), Melbourne: RMIT & Swinburne University of Technology.

² ibid

³ Ogle G. and Law R. (2020), *Connectivity Costs II: Telecommunications Affordability and Waged Poor Households*, Unley: SACOSS.

goes beyond simply improving ICT and also improves digital inclusion in the community⁴. A strong commitment from the South Australian government can help our state on the path to digital inclusion.

The Department of Premier and Cabinet have been undertaking development of a Digital Inclusion Strategy, co-designed with industry, the community sector and government. SACOSS has been involved in this co-design process and notes the enthusiasm and knowledge being shared by participants. This process presents an opportunity to address the deep-seated digital exclusion that is embedded in poverty and inequality, and to ensure digital readiness for our state.

SACOSS has identified crucial areas for commitment and investment – a set of goals that will help drive the digital inclusion agenda, ensuring people can keep up and stay engaged in our changing world. These goals are aimed at enabling all South Australians to have the skills and resources that they need to adapt to the fast paced, innovative nature of our increasingly online society.

SACOSS Proposal

SACOSS is calling on the government to commit to the following set of goals for our state.

All South Australians:

- Have access to internet connections beyond their mobile phone
- Have a base level of digital competency as measured by an [agreed framework](#)
- Are able to access South Australian government websites and information without barriers of disability, language, cultural background or data cost.

All South Australian Children in secondary school have their own access to devices and data at home to enable them to do school work, research and assignments, and online-schooling where necessary.

All South Australians Living with Disability have access to adequate affordable data to enable the use of assistive technology appropriate to them.

Public Access Points

- Every suburb and regional town has at least one all-weather public internet access facility with computers, printers and long opening hours
- All Local Government Areas have at least one secure, non-commercial public wi-fi network accessible from multiple public venues.

We hope that these goals will form part of the state Digital Inclusion Strategy, or at least that the Strategy will take us toward those goals. And if so, we would want to see an investment of a similar size to the Digital Restart Fund (\$120m) to deliver on the goals and strategy.

⁴ NSW Government, [Digital Restart Fund](#), website accessed 3 February 2020; Victorian Government, Victorian Budget 2020-21, [Turning Digital Demand into Online Opportunity](#), website accessed 3 February 2020.