Tackling SA's Regional Digital Divide

The Vital Work of Libraries and Community Centres

"I am fairly confident now with my digital skills now, but sunk to a real low, before I was using the computer classes at the community hub" – Older person in casual work, Yorke Peninsula

"You want us to do this extra work, give us the extra resources we need" – Regional librarian

The ability to access the online world and navigate that world has never been more important. Critical government and private services continue moving online, and digital skills are essential for employment and education opportunities, and for social inclusion.

But some community members are more likely to be digitally-excluded – not have the skills to do what they need to do, or not have access to data, or devices. This includes older people, low-income people, and people in regional areas. According to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index[1], regional SA is well behind Adelaide (7.1-point gap), and the rest of Australia, including other regional areas (4.2-point gap).

Aspect of digital inclusion	Adelaide	Regional SA	Regional Australia	Australia
Access	72.4	**63.5**	69.3	72.0
Affordability	95.0	**95.0**	95.0	95.0
Ability	62.0	**54.7**	59.7	64.9
Index Score	**72.7**	**65.6**	**69.8**	**73.2**

Across SA, but particularly in regional communities, libraries and community centres perform a vital but under-resourced role: they provide WiFi facilities, computers, printing, digital skills classes, and one-on-one advice and assistance. This work, explored in 2023 in *'Keys To The Digital World: The Critical Role Of Regional Libraries And Community Centres In Building Digital Inclusion'[2]*, is a lifeline for people struggling to setup and manage their devices, perform basic digital tasks, interact with Centrelink, MyGov, banking, and other services, and for those who have little online access at home. But this work can also be a significant burden for these quite small organisations.

In regional communities, the pressures on libraries and community centres are exacerbated by the significant loss of essential face-to-face services. This has led to increased pressure for

people to access services digitally, and increased pressure on libraries and community centres, which in small towns are often the last face-to-face community supports, to be their area's 'digital jack-of-all-trades'. Library and community centre staff are now doing work that previously would have been performed by Centrelink workers, bank workers, and telco workers.

In the last state budget, $200 million was allocated over 5 years to improve government ICT systems, but there was no funding to build digital ability and access.[3] In the 2021-2022 budget, there was a $1 million, one-off fund for skills programs for libraries - 'Being Digital'. But this was not new funding, just funding reallocated from the existing libraries' budget. And the funding, just a few hundred dollars for some of the smallest, most digitally-disadvantaged communities, was not enough to tackle SA's digital divide.

There is a deep need for significant, long-term funding to reduce digital exclusion, with funding targeted at the most digitally-excluded regional communities. We need:

- Ongoing programs to build skill, recognising many people need long-term support to become and stay comfortable online, as the digital world continues to evolve;
- Mobile and roaming services to reach those communities where there are not dedicated digital inclusion services;
- Outreach work, for digital inclusion workers to connect with community members who might not feel always feel comfortable seeking support in existing settings;
- Loaning programs for people who cannot afford the devices and data that they need;
- Free Wi-Fi and computer hubs, for communities where there might currently be no free access points at all.

SACOSS is calling on the state government to tackle SA's regional divide through the following, ongoing package, supported by local government coordination and leadership:

Fair Funding for Regional Digital Inclusion
1) Substantial new funding for regional digital inclusion services, primarily through libraries and community centres, with coordination from local Councils
2) A new funding model to ensure this funding is allocated in the fairest, most effective fashion, prioritising the most digitally-excluded communities

Skill and Confidence
3) Funding for drop-in services and community education
4) Funding for mobile and roaming services that can provide advice and assistance

Access to Devices and Data
5) Ensuring even the smallest regional communities have at least one all-weather space where there is access – with reasonable opening hours – to free Wi-Fi, computers, printing, and related facilities
6) Funding for device-loaning and data-loaning programs, to allow low-income people to take devices and data home, to improve their access, and bolster their confidence and skill

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[3] State Budget 2023-2024 State Budget Measures Paper, pg. 9: https://www.statebudget.sa.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/914180/2023-24-Budget-Measures-Statement.pdf