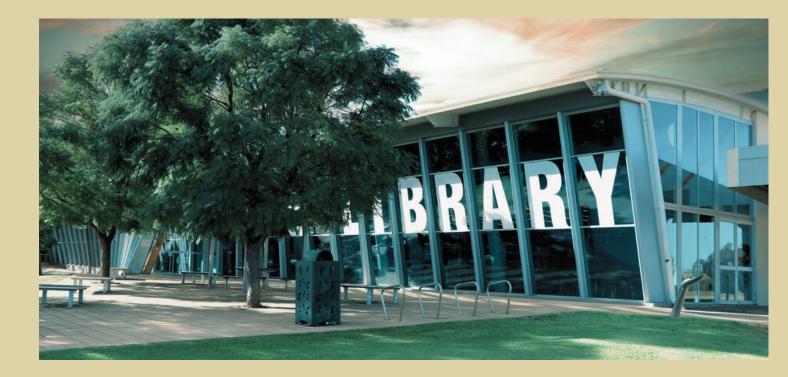# KEYS TO THE DIGITAL WORLD

The Critical Role of Regional Libraries and Community Centres in Building Digital Inclusion

November 2023

SACOSS

Keys to the Digital World

The Critical Role of Regional Libraries and Community Centres in Building Digital Inclusion

Executive Summary

This report, the product of months of consultation with libraries, community centres, digitally-excluded community members, and other stakeholders, explores the vital role of libraries and community centres in tackling SA's significant, stubborn regional digital divide, that is, the gap between levels of digital access, confidence, and skill, between regional SA, and Adelaide.

The report notes how the substantial loss of face-to-face public and private services, such as banking, telecommunications, and state and federal government supports, especially in the smallest communities, has meant increased frustration and stress for community members, who feel forced to access services online, with little assistance.

This same trend has also meant increased workloads for libraries and community centres, who are increasingly having to be their community's digital support jack-of-all-trades. This report highlights both the huge digital inclusion success stories being achieved by libraries and community centres, but also the significant capacity challenges faced by these organisations.

Current levels of resourcing for digital inclusion work are simply not adequate to meet community needs, and are putting staff and volunteers in libraries, community centres, and other organisations, under real strain. There is an urgent need for a substantial, ongoing investment from the state government, to better support community members with limited digital access or skill to build their capacity to engage with the digital world.

This desperately-needed investment should also include resourcing for mobile, outreach, and roaming digital services to engage digitally-excluded community members who are currently not accessing the advice, training, and other digital supports provided by libraries and community centres, as well as programs to assist people unable to get online because of limited ability to pay for data, or for suitable devices.

Summary of Recommendations

This report presents the following recommendations, emerging from the consultation that took place during much of 2023. Recommendations are largely targeted at the state government, though with some recommendations for local Councils, and the Local Government Association of SA (LGASA), as the peak body for local governments.

Recommendations for the state government:

Skill and Confidence

1) State government provides ongoing funding for drop-in services and community education

2) State government provides funding for mobile and roaming digital inclusion services

Access to Devices and Data

3) State government ensures that 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, and related facilities

4) State government provides funding for targeted device-loaning and data-loaning programs

Fair Funding for Regional Digital Inclusion

5) State government provides significant new investment in regional digital inclusion services, primarily (but not necessarily only) through libraries and community centres

6) Treasury develops (or funds the development of) a new funding model to allocate this funding in the fairest and most effective fashion

Recommendations for the local government sector:

7) Regional local Councils work with local libraries, community centres, and other relevant stakeholders, to map out existing digital inclusion supports, challenges faced by digital inclusion services, and how these services can be further promoted

8) LGASA explore potential barriers to collaboration on digital inclusion services between larger and small regional Councils, and identify solutions to facilitate larger and smaller local governments working more closely together

9) LGASA incorporate the recommendations in this report into its existing advocacy work

A: Introduction

Digital technologies are now taking a key role in economic and social life, yet large numbers of people do not have the online access or capability to engage with the digital world. As more people, more businesses, and more government services go online, the disadvantages of being digitally excluded increase. The digital divide between those operating in the digital world, and those on the margins, becomes narrower but deeper.

This digital exclusion reflects and compounds other areas of disadvantage, with people on lower incomes, older people, and people living with disability, all likely to be less included in the digital world. As such, digital exclusion is a new frontier of poverty, but digital *inclusion* is about more than simply owning a computer or smartphone. It is about being able to access and safely and effectively use online and digital technologies to engage with employment, education, training, commerce, and government services, and to enhance quality of life.

The 'Keys to the Digital World' project

The problems posed by digital exclusion are gaining increasing recognition, and libraries and community centres were among the first to provide key services and supports to people to address barriers to participating online. These services are particularly important in regional areas where levels of digital inclusion are lower, and the non-digital services and options are more difficult to access, than in metropolitan areas.

Recognising the importance of digital inclusion work in regional areas, and the key role played by local libraries and community centres in particular, the Local Government Association of South Australia, as well as the auDA foundation, funded SACOSS to conduct research into the challenges around digital inclusion in regional South Australia, the work libraries and community centres were doing to address the issue, and to provide recommendations for additional work that should be resourced.

The 'Keys To The Digital World' project saw SACOSS spend much of the first half of 2023 consulting with:

- Regional libraries and community centres across the state
- Community members who have been assisted by the digital inclusion services provided by these organisations
- Community members experiencing digital exclusion, with a particular focus on Age Pensioners, but with a number of older JobSeekers, concentrated in a couple of locations
- A range of other stakeholders including local Councils, community organisations, regional bodies, digital inclusion advocates, and others

These consultations included wide-ranging face-to-face interviews in the LGAs of Karoonda East Murray, Peterborough, and Yorke Peninsula, three of the most digitally-excluded

Council areas in the state, along with the much more populous and less digitally-disadvantaged Mount Gambier LGA.

Supplementing these interviews were other face-to-face and remote interviews with regional libraries, community centres, and members of the public, from across the state.

See the Appendices (Chapter G) for further information about the consultations that took place as part of this project.

Overview of report

Chapter B of this report provides an overview of the nature of digital inclusion and exclusion, exploring the dimensions of digital 'ability', 'access', and 'affordability'. It notes the relatively higher levels of digital disadvantage in SA, and particularly, in regional SA. It also notes the relatively sparse and lowly-populated nature of regional SA, and significant loss of face-to-face essential services in regional SA, themes that will be further explored in relation to the digital world in Sections D and E.

Chapter C presents an overview of the existing digital inclusion services provided by the libraries sector and community centres sector, across SA, as well as providing some background info on what library users have been reporting about digital inclusion services provided by libraries, and the current state of funding for digital inclusion work in SA.

Chapter D includes four local snapshots, covering four local government areas that were key sites for consultation and engagement, as part of this project: 1) Yorke Peninsula, 2) Peterborough, 3) Karoonda East Murray, and 4) Mount Gambier. The first three LGAs were chosen because they have high levels of digital exclusion. Mount Gambier, as a far more populous, diverse, and digitally-connected region, was chosen, as a point of contrast. Each snapshot includes an overview of levels of digital inclusion, existing digital inclusion services (primarily libraries and community centres), and particular local challenges faced by digital inclusion services, and some of the snapshots including local digital inclusion success stories.

Chapter E presents the findings that emerged from months of interviews across regional SA, and divided into two parts:

Part 1: Being digitally-excluded in regional SA
Part 2: Being a digital inclusion service in regional SA

Part 1 highlights the ways that different dimensions of digital exclusion compound each other, especially in contexts where there are few face-to-face service options. Part 2 explores a number of themes relating to the pressures faced by regional libraries and community centres in fulfilling their digital inclusion roles and identifies some of the challenges they face in engaging certain digitally-excluded community members.

Chapter F presents a set of recommendations for bolstering the capacity of libraries and community centres to tackle SA's significant regional digital divide.

B: The Digital World

The digital divide

The [Australian Digital Inclusion Index](#) (ADII)[1] is the principle measure of digital inclusion in Australia. Three dimensions of digital inclusion are measured through the Australian Internet Usage Survey, a survey about internet usage, products, and services, designed by the ADII research team. The most recent survey used data from 5132 individuals across the country.

An index score is generated where 100 indicates perfect digital inclusion (i.e. scores in the highest range, for every question). Scores below 100 indicate a level of digital exclusion.

The three dimensions of the ADII are:

- **Access** is defined by the reliability, speed and data allowances of digital connections, the number of devices and frequency of use;
- **Affordability** is the percentage of household income required to gain good quality connectivity, with those who would have to spend more than 5% of income being in "affordability stress";
- **Digital ability** measures skill levels, what people do online and their confidence in doing it.

The ADII is generally published annually to provide a profile of digital inclusion at national, state, and local government level.

Through this we observe that digital inclusion increases with income, education, and employment, but is lower among older (and particularly post-employment) age groups, the unemployed and those not in the workforce, people living with disability, First Nations people, and, importantly for this report, among those living in regional areas.

Thus, we see that digital exclusion reflects and compounds other areas of disadvantage.

While overall levels of digital inclusion have been increasing in recent years, the latest ADII data suggests that 9.4% of Australians are still highly excluded.

South Australia

South Australia scores poorly by comparison with the rest of country and there has been persistent gap in digital inclusion between SA and the rest of Australia, although that has closed in recent years.

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[1] Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Holcombe-James, I., Ormond-Parker, L., and Ganley, L. (2023). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023*. ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra. Consulted August 10, 2023.

In 2022 South Australia was 1.2 points below the national average and the third-lowest Australian jurisdiction (ahead of Tasmania and the NT), as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: ADII, Summary Data, 2022

Dimension of digital inclusion	South Australia	Australia	Gap
Access	70.0	72.0	2.0
Affordability	95.0	95.0	0.0
Ability	62.0	64.9	2.9
Index Score	**72.0**	**73.2**	**1.2**

Regional South Australia

SA has a particularly large, stubborn regional digital divide

There remains a significant and stubborn digital divide between Adelaide, and regional SA. Compared to the rest of regional Australia, regional SA experiences substantially poorer digital inclusion. Regional SA has an index score 7.1 points behind Adelaide, and 4.2 points behind the rest of regional Australia, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: ADII, Metro-Regional Divide, 2022

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

Only 24% of regional people are 'high users' (frequent users) of the online world, compared to 38%, in metropolitan areas.[2]

Demographic and geographic challenges

Regional SA also has significant demographic and geographic challenges that make the impacts of digital exclusion more severe and make it harder to effectively tackle this digital divide.

Regional SA tends to be more sparsely-populated and more isolated than regional areas in the eastern states and communities tend to be much smaller. This results in fewer face-to-face essential services and greater pressure to access services digitally, along with challenges relating to funding digital inclusion services in often very small communities.

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[2] Notley, T., Chambers, S., Park, S., Dezuanni, M., *Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs*, WSU, QUT, University of Canberra, 2021, pg. 28.

Outside of Mount Barker, effectively part of the Greater Adelaide metropolitan area, SA has only two regional centres with populations greater than 20,000: Mount Gambier (33,000), and Whyalla (21,000). A relatively high proportion of SA's regional population lives in areas that are, by the definitions of the ABS, classified as 'outer regional', 'remote', or 'very remote', with 52% of SA's regional population of around 230,000 people, living in outer-regional, remote, or very-remote areas, compared to 25% in NSW, and 18% in Victoria.

The population in regional SA is also much older than regional areas in other states: the median age in regional SA is 47 years, compared to 43 years in regional NSW and regional Victoria, 41 years in regional Qld, and 40 years in regional WA. The median population age for Adelaide is 39 years.

Regional SA's much older population is a key contributing factor to the greater level of digital exclusion experienced in SA compared to other regional areas.

Essential services are digitising, withdrawing from communities

Nationally, there has long been a trend towards the digitisation of essential services across all of regional Australia including state and federal government services, such as welfare, health, and education and banking and telecommunication shopfronts.

Regional SA has been particularly hard hit by the closure of regional bank branches. Across Australia since 1975 (the high-water mark), 1725 bank branches have shut, a 61.5 % reduction in regional footprint.

Bank closures have accelerated in recent years with over 1600 branches closures between June 2017 and June 2022. A disproportionate number of these branches were located in regional Australia.

In 1975 South Australia had 228 regional bank branches and that had fallen to 67 by 2021, a reduction of 71%.[3]

Dimensions of digital exclusion

Affordability remains a huge challenge for people on low incomes

Although telecommunications services have become more affordable in recent years, many people on low income still greatly struggle with the cost of data and devices.

Among people on low incomes there is significant telecommunications stress (defined as spending more than 5% of income on telecommunications). 100% of Australians in the lowest income quintile (those earning less than $34K per annuum), and 48.3% of those in the second-lowest, would have to pay more than 5% of their household income to access quality, reliable internet connectivity.

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[3] *The Regional:* https://www.theregional.com.au/closure-update-first-half-2021, accessed July 10, 2023.

People in the lowest income quintile had an ADII score 19.2 points below the national average.

Low ability puts people, particularly people over 75, at huge risk of exclusion

Digital ability generally refers to the skill levels of people accessing the digital world, what people can do online, and how easily they can do it. There is no single, universal definition of 'digital skills' or 'digital ability', and of course, the skills required will change as the available technology changes, and requires new knowledge.[4]

There is no doubt, though, that older Australians continue to perform more poorly on the ability dimension of the ADII, despite an increase in in the number of older people online. According to the latest ADII, people in the 65-74 age-group have an 'ability' score of 42.3, 22.6 points behind the national average (64.9), with people in the 75+ age-group a massive 41.6 points behind, with a score of 23.6.

2022 analysis by AUDA showed that 75% of over-75s fall into the 'low digital ability' category, across 12 different digital tasks, compared to only 12% of 18-23-year-olds.

Older people also lack confidence, with less than half confident about making online purchases, or using social connection tools, and only 10% confident about troubleshooting internet connection problems.[5]

Fears about online security and scams

There is also increasing concern about online security and scams. A very high proportion of respondents to a recent national survey, the Cyber Security Research Report, with over 80% having high levels of concern, particularly women (84%), people aged over 70 (86%), and people from CALD backgrounds (90%).

People also fear that cyber criminals were becoming more sophisticated (74%) and are more worried about cyber security at home (64%).[6]

Online scams are not only a huge risk to people who are digitally-excluded, they act as a major disincentive, for many people, to going online, at all.

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[4] It is a very welcome development that the Future Skills Organisation, in collaboration with the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance, have adopted the Australian Digital Capability Framework, as a common language for describing what it means to be digitally-able.
[5] Notley, T., Chambers, S., Park, S., Dezuanni, M., *Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs*, WSU, QUT, University of Canberra, 2021, pg. 35.
[6] AuDA, *Digital Lives of Australians*, 2022, pg. 26.

Digital ability and job-readiness

Jobseekers cannot be work-ready if they do not have basic digital skills. Even before COVID, it was anticipated that 90% of all jobs by 2030 would need digital skills, and 45% would need more advanced digital skills.[7]

Digital capabilities are now critical for not only applying for paid roles, but undertaking professional development, and accessing government services and supports, such as income support payments for job-seekers and students, as we will see, later in this report.

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[7] Australian Government, Innovation, and Science Australia, *Australia 2030: Prosperity through Innovation*: https://www.industry.gov.au/publications/australia-2030-prosperity-through-innovation, pg. 2, consulted July 4, 2023.

C: Building Digital Inclusion: The Work of Libraries and Community Centres

Libraries and community centres are the primary sites of digital inclusion work in regional communities. This project often focused on the digital inclusion work taking place in some of SA's smallest regional communities, where, often, the sole digital inclusion provider – and sometimes, the main, or even sole, community institution – is the library. As a result, in this report, there is a particularly strong focus on the work of regional libraries.

In some regional communities, the work of libraries and community centres can complement each other, and each has essential roles to play, in tackling SA's regional digital divide.

Library users tend to be older

Library users tend to be older and retired, with recent 2020 analysis of SA's libraries network finding nearly 60% were over 50 and more than 40% were over 60, while 40% were retired.

However, while a much smaller user-group, students and job seekers visit more frequently and for longer.[8]

Use of digital inclusion services in libraries

The role of libraries as facilitators of digital inclusion – through their ICT facilities, such as free WiFi, public PCs, and printing and photocopying, as well as services to assist people with digital queries and build digital skills – has become an established function of the library network. Recent SA research found 15% of library users' principal reason to visit was to access digital services.[9]

Other SA research found that 42% of library users had accessed the internet at the library in the past year with 70% rating this service as 'important' and just under half as 'very important'.[10]

Regional library users have been found to be slightly more likely to use library computers and WiFi than metro library users in SA, and twice as likely to seek support with devices or online applications, a service that is rated highly by regional library users.[11]

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[8] SGS Economics and Planning, *The answer is libraries: The value of public libraries in South Australia*, prepared for Public Libraries South Australia, 2020, pg. 18.
[9] SGS Economics and Planning, *The answer is libraries: The value of public libraries in South Australia*, prepared for Public Libraries South Australia, 2020, pg. 20.
[10] Local Government Association of South Australia, *Value of Libraries Study*, 2020, pg. 2.
[11] Murray, D., Cleland, J., Townson, O., *An Assessment of Service Quality, Benefits and Satisfaction with Community Libraries in South Australia*, prepared for Public Library Services, 2020, pg. 19.

Current digital inclusion services in SA

Current digital inclusion services in SA, across libraries and community centres, can be defined broadly as either 'ability' services, or 'access' services, using the ADII concepts mentioned earlier, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of digital inclusion services provided by libraries and community centres

Organisation	'Ability' services	'Access' services

Libraries	• Most libraries provide some form of either drop-in or pre-booked assistance with device or other digital issues
	
	• Some libraries provide digital skills classes, on a variety of topics, pitched at different levels of ability
		• All public libraries provide:
		
		  o Free WiFi
		  o Public PCs
		  o Printing and photocopying facilities
		
		• A very small number of mainly-metropolitan libraries provide loanable devices[12]

Community Centres	• Some community centres provide some form of either drop-in or pre-booked assistance with device or other digital issues
	
	• Some (a minority) community centres provide digital skills classes, on a variety of topics, pitched at different levels of ability
		• Some community centres provide:
		
		  o Free WiFi
		  o Public PCs
		  o Printing and photocopying facilities

How is digital inclusion work currently being resourced?

Digital inclusion services provided by SA's libraries and community centres have been resourced through a mix of state and government funding. A particular challenge, when thinking about how digital inclusion work is funded, is that there are many services that might not *explicitly* be digital inclusion programs, but which in practice involve a significant amount of digital work. For instance, services that support community members to engage with state and federal government services online (See Table 4).

It is worth noting that as this report largely explores the experiences of adults in regional SA navigating the digital world, Table 4 excludes the important digital inclusion programs, both state and federal, that are assisting school-children to access data, and appropriate devices.

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[12] In Adelaide, libraries in four local government areas offer device-loaning: Port Adelaide Enfield (devices can be borrowed by anyone, and taken home); Prospect (devices can be borrowed, but cannot be taken out of the library); Marion (devices can be borrowed, but cannot be taken out of the library); Tea Tree Gully (devices can be taken home, but can only be borrowed by people over the age of 55).

Table 4: Summary of funding for digital inclusion services in SA

Organisation	State govt funding	Federal govt funding
Libraries	• 2021-2022: one-off, $1 million allocation – not new but reallocated funding – for 'Being Digital' digital skills program (surplus funds rolled over into 2022-2023 FY) • 'Innovation Fund' grants, which can be to purchase devices, and other technological upgrades	• 'Be Connected' funding, dispersed via Good Things Foundation to some libraries, to deliver a range of digital literacy programs, largely targeted at seniors
Community Centres	• Services SA funding, to support some community centres to process payments and assist community members with state government applications and online portals • From 2023, a $1 million annual allocation from Skills SA for adult community education courses (reversing cuts under the previous state government), covering foundational skills, including digital ability, which some community centres can access	• 'Be Connected' funding, dispersed via Good Things Foundation to some community centres, to deliver a range of digital literacy programs, largely targeted at seniors • Services Australia funding, to support community centres to provide assistance to people interacting with the Centrelink and MyGov online portals

The broader context of funding is also important. There is a substantial imbalance in resourcing the digital world, with much of the funding allocated by government to improve its own IT systems rather than to support digital inclusion

In the 2020-21 state budget, the previous government invested $120 million over 5 years in the establishment a Digital Restart Fund to improve government IT systems, with a promise of "improved digital experience and access to information to businesses and consumers".[13] This was added to in the following year with $25.3 million across four government IT projects, and $11.9 million the following year to extend opening hours for some key Service SA centres and expand digital accessibility of government services.

Last year's budget then allocated a further $200 million over 5 years for a Digital Investment Fund to continue upgrades to government IT infrastructure.[14]

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[13] South Australian 2020-2021 State Budget Measures Paper, pgs. 11-12: https://www.treasury.sa.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/518622/2020-21-BMS-web-version.pdf

[14] South Australian 2021-2022 State Budget Measures Paper, pgs. 72-73: https://www.treasury.sa.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/519065/2021-22-Budget-Measures-Statement.pdf

While all these investments may be important, almost all are focused on government's own IT needs and services. This may improve government services and assist digitally engaged community members in dealing with the government., However, none of this funding addresses the lack of digital skills in parts of the community and little or none of this funding reached regional libraries and community centres that are working to overcome this digital exclusion.

As shown in Table 4, the libraries' primary digital inclusion program funding, the 'Being Digital' skills program came from a reallocation of money within the libraries budget – not from new government investment.

A note on regional libraries

In regional SA, there are two kinds of public libraries:

- **Standard libraries**, which would be familiar to anyone living in a metropolitan area, and which are generally also available in larger regional communities. There are more than 30 of these in regional SA.
- **School-community libraries (SCL)**, a unique hybrid-model where a library is located inside a school, and shared between school students and the wider community.[15] There are over 40 SCLs in regional SA, largely in the smallest, most isolated localities, where there are less than 3,000 residents.

There is a significant size-difference between metropolitan libraries, standard regional libraries, and school-community libraries. According to 2020 analysis, metropolitan libraries have 9.4 staff per branch compared with 3.6 in regional libraries and 1.9 in SCLs.[16]

The challenges of building digital inclusion in regional libraries, particularly SCLs, will be discussed in Chapters D and E.

South Australian 2022-2023 State Budget Measures Paper, pg. 100: https://www.treasury.sa.gov.au/budget/current-budget/22-23-state-budget/2022-23-Budget-Measures-Statement.pdf
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
[15] The SCL model of libraries sees staff report to the school principal, library facilities managed by the school, and the bulk of funding coming from the state government Department of Education and Child Development. For an exploration of the successes and the challenges faced by the innovative school-community library model, see Sarjeant-Jenkins, R., *School-community libraries of South Australia: The lived experience*, University of Saskatchewan, 2020.
[16] SGS Economics and Planning, *The answer is libraries: The value of public libraries in South Australia, prepared for Public Libraries South Australia*, 2020, pg. 12.

Snapshot of a regional digital inclusion service: Southern Yorke Peninsula Community Hub

Southern Yorke Peninsula Community Hub (SYPCH) is an independent community hub that has established a prominent reputation as the key resource for assistance with the online world for the southern half of the Yorke Peninsula (we will learn more about the digital inclusion challenges facing the Yorke Peninsula, in the next section).

Community members who access SYPCH's digital supports are largely Age Pensioners. In addition, older people on JobSeeker also use their digital inclusion services, partly because the Job Agencies, which job-seekers engage with as part of their obligations, use SYPCH as their base when they visit the region.

SYPCH runs weekly classes, with about 6-12 regular attendees. They also provide an all-hours drop-in service for people needing assistance with their digital technology, or with online services or portals. Staff and volunteers assist with a variety of digital issues, including:

- Phone setup and maintenance
- Creating an e-mail account and basic e-mail use
- Saving and transferring photos and other files
- Videoconferencing
- Safe web-browsing in a time of considerable anxiety about online scams and harm
- Other online functions and processes

Services SA and Services Australia agent

As a Services SA agent, SYPCH process forms and transactions relating to license and registration applications and renewals, and other state government services. And as a Services Australia agent, SYPCH supports community members to access Medicare, Centrelink, and MyGov services. This support includes:

- Providing access to computer, WiFi, printing, and phone facilities
- Setting-up accounts for accessing MyGov and related government portals
- Verifying identity and other documents that are essential for applying for government payments and other entitlements
- Referrals for other relevant services

These are not necessarily brief tasks. The kind of support needed from SYPCH staff and volunteers, for a digitally-excluded community member to be able to successfully complete an application or transaction, can be quite time-consuming.

For instance, a community member may need to access MyGov, for the first time, but they do not have an e-mail address. So, the SYPCH team will need to first setup an e-mail address for the customer, then show them how to log-in to and navigate their e-mail account, and

then show them how to log-in to MyGov. All this would need to happen, before anyone can even start on an application for a federal government payment or service.

SYPCH reports that their Services Australia grant funds 8 hours of support for community members interacting with relevant portals and processes. However, it should be no surprise that they find that the reality is closer to 20 hours of staff time required. This is 150% more than the amount allowed for, by the grant.

D: SA's Regional Digital Divide: Snapshots from Four Local Councils

1. Yorke Peninsula

1.1 The local context

Although most regional communities in SA have older populations relative to the state average, Yorke Peninsula LGA, in particular, has a significantly older population, with a median age of 57 years – 16 years greater than the median age for SA (41 years). More than a third (35.7%) of the population is over the age of 65.[17]

It is a sparsely-populated region and relatively decentralised, with no single population centre and with many people living in small communities.

There has been a significant loss of face-to-face government and private-sector services. There are few banks left on the Peninsula, and almost no specialist or retail telecommunications providers.

Government offices, such as Services Australia and Services SA hubs, are mostly located in Kadina, outside the Yorke Peninsula LGA.

1.2 Digital inclusion (Australian Digital Inclusion Index)

According to the ADII, Yorke Peninsula Council is likely to be one of the least-digitally included LGAs in South Australia. It ranks 46th, out of 51 regional SA LGAs. Its ADII scores sit significantly below the state average for digital inclusion. Overall DI is 9.6 points below the state average (62.4 vs. 72), with digital ability 10.3-points lower (51.7 vs. 62), as seen in Table 5. Significant parts of the peninsula continue to struggle with connectivity and reception issues.

Table 5: Australian Digital Inclusion Index Scores – Yorke Peninsula LGA

Measure of digital inclusion	Yorke Peninsula Council	Average across South Australia	National average
Digital ability	51.7	62	64.9
Digital access	63.3	70	72
Digital affordability	94.1	95	95
Overall digital inclusion score	62.4	72	73.2

1.3 Overview of digital inclusion services in Yorke Peninsula LGA

Digital inclusion services available in the Yorke Peninsula LGA area are summarised in Table 6. Four towns have a school-community library (SLC) – Ardrossan, Maitland, Minlaton, and

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[17] Australian Bureau of Statistics: https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA48830, accessed August 6, 2023.

Yorketown – and two of those towns – Maitland and Yorketown – also have a community hub or information centre.

There are many communities with no permanent or visiting digital inclusion services.

Table 6: Digital Inclusion Services – Yorke Peninsula LGA

Digital inclusion service provider	Ability-related services	Access-related services
Southern Yorke Peninsula Community Hub (SYPCH) (Yorketown)	• Digital drop-in service • Ongoing, weekly classes • Service Australia agent • Service SA agent	• Free public WiFi • Public PCs (for Centrelink/My Gov use) • Public PCs (for general use) – charge of $3

School-community libraries:
 	
  • **Maitland**
  • **Minlaton**
  • **Ardrossan**
  • **Yorketown**
	• Digital drop-in service
	• *Previously: digital skills classes, as part of 'Being Digital' program*
		• Free public Wi-Fi
		• Public PCs

Maitland Information Centre (MIC)	• Digital drop-in service • Service Australia agent	• 1 public PC (for Centrelink/My Gov use) • 1 public PC (for general use)
Other DI services	• U3A (University of the Third Age) regularly runs digital skills classes in Maitland to members (for a small fee) • Country Homes Services provides informal digital skills mentoring and training to clients	• In addition to free public WiFi at each of the SCLs, there is also WiFi access at Harvest Corner, Minlaton

1.4 Local case-studies

Financial independence, personal empowerment

An older community member, an Age Pensioner was still in part-time work, and who previously had very limited digital skills, spoke about how empowering it was building her digital ability through the classes and mentoring at SYPCH.

She spoke about the sense of independence she derived from learning how to do online banking for herself, instead of having to rely on her husband.

She also learned how to use a card reader for her small, at-home hairdressing business. It has been a profound turnaround for her:

"I am fairly confident now, but sunk to a real low, before I was using the Hub"

Urgent phone-reset support

One community member was frozen-out of their Samsung phone, locking-them out of all their apps, and leaving them unable to accessing any of their contact phone numbers.

It is not hard to appreciate how inconvenient and stressful this predicament would be, especially if this is the only device one uses to access the digital world: being locked-out of your phone means, effectively, being locked-out of key government portals, and being cut-off from social contacts, and important sources of news and information.

What would have been a three-hour drive to the nearest Telstra store, in Kadina, was avoided, thanks to the vital assistance of SYPCH, who were able to successfully support the client to reset the phone's password, without losing important apps or contact details.

1.5 Digital inclusion obstacle: need for outreach and mobile services

The Yorke Peninsula's decentralised, sparse character, with several towns and many very small communities located across the region, mean that there are many localities where there are no digital inclusion support services: neither 'access' measures, such as free WiFi, and computers and other facilities, nor 'ability' services, such as drop-in services for community members to seek advice.

Due to the very small size of many of these communities, drop-in services, for instance, would need to be visiting supports that regularly setup in particular locations. However, outreach and mobile digital inclusion supports are difficult to establish when the existing services – the libraries, and the school-community hubs – have such limited staffing to support such work.

2. Peterborough

2.1 The local context

Much like Yorke Peninsula LGA, Peterborough LGA has been deeply-impacted by the loss of face-to-face govt and private-sector services, mostly recently, the closure of the last bank branch in town, in late 2022.

It is one of the most disadvantaged white communities in the state, with higher rates of people on working-age income support payments, such as JobSeeker. It has a median personal income of $459 per week, compared to the state figure, of $734, and a median family income of $992, compared to a state-wide figure of $1889. Peterborough, at the time of the 2021 Census, had an unemployment rate of 12%, compared to the state average of 5.4%.[18]

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[18] Australian Bureau of Statistics: https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA45540, accessed August 6, 2023.

Also like the Yorke Peninsula, it has a significantly older population, with a median age of 54, 13 years greater than the median age for SA, 41.

It also has a shrinking population, a reflection of longstanding economic and employment challenges for the region. According to ABS Census data, Peterborough's population shrunk by 5.4%, between 2011, and 2021, from 1,731 residents to 1,638 residents.

2.2 Digital inclusion (Australian Digital Inclusion Index)

Peterborough LGA is likely to be one of the most digitally-excluded LGAs in the state. Its ADII scores overall is 10.6 points below the state average (61.4 vs. 72). The gulf widens dramatically, on digital ability, where the gap is 14.9 points (47.1 vs. 52), as seen in Table 7.

Among regional LGAs, Peterborough ranks 49th out of 51 LGAs. It has the third-lowest digital inclusion score in all of South Australia.

Table 7: Australian Digital Inclusion Index Scores – Peterborough LGA

Measure of digital inclusion	Peterborough score	State average	National average
Digital ability	47.1	62	64.9
Digital access	61.7	70	72
Digital affordability	93.1	95	95
Overall digital inclusion score	61.4	72	73.2

2.3 Overview of digital inclusion services in Peterborough Council

Digital inclusion services available in the Peterborough LGA are summarised in Table 8. Its primary digital inclusion service provider is the Peterborough School and Community Library, located within the school grounds.

The Rural Transaction Centre, as a Services Australia agent, is able to assist community members to access the Centrelink and MyGov portals, through free WiFi and public PC access, and can sometimes provide advice and further assistance.

Table 8: Digital Inclusion Services – Peterborough LGA

Digital inclusion service providers	Ability-related services	Access-related services
Peterborough SCL	• Digital drop-in support	• 2 public PCs • Free public WiFi
Peterborough Community Hub	• Digital drop-in support • *Previously: IPad training classes*	• Free public WiFi
Rural Transaction Centre	• Service Australia agent o Limited opening hours and support available • Service SA agent	• Public PC (for Centrelink/MyGov functions) • Printing, photocopying, etc. • Free public WiFi

Peterborough Council		• Council provides free WiFi on main street of Peterborough
		• The following locations also have free WiFi access:
		  o Peterborough Youth Centre
		  o Steamtown Visitor Centre

2.4 Local case-study

Support with safely using your device

A local resident and Age Pensioner spoke with great praise about the support of the library staff, who regularly assisted them with phone issues, particularly how to avoid and 'screen-out' scam phone calls, a source of considerable frustration.

They noted that whenever they purchased a new phone, usually from the Post Office (there are no telco retailers in town), they would be sent to the library, who would assist with the sometimes lengthy, time-consuming process of phone setup and SIM card registration.

Support from the library had become even more critical, as they could no longer rely on relatives:

> *"Previously relied on relatives for tech help, but they now live in Sydney"*

2.5 Digital inclusion obstacle: lack of physical space for classes at SCL

Staff at Peterborough SCL reported that there was limited space in the library building for running digital skills classes, or any kind of digital support that would require some level of privacy, and separation from other library activities.

Staff also noted that surplus classrooms and other spaces at the school - rooms that are not being used due to smaller student numbers and which could be used as community spaces for running digital skills classes, and other supports - are dismantled by the Department of Education, who manage all buildings and spaces on the site.

These empty classrooms would be ideal sites for digital skills classes and other group activities, and their loss makes it almost impossible to run face-to-face classes inside the library. Unable to access digital skills classes in town, we heard from some Peterborough residents, Age Pensioners, who instead took weekly classes at the Orroroo School-Community Library – a 74km round-trip.

3. Karoonda East Murray (KEM)

3.1 The local context

Karoonda East Murray is one of the least-populous LGAs in the state. It had 1,007 residents, according to the 2021 ABS Census, of which roughly half, 517 residents, live in the Karoonda township itself. Among local Councils, on population, it is ranks 66th, out of 68 LGAs.

Like many of the smallest regional communities, it has also been impacted by the loss of face-to-face government and private-sector services.

It is primarily an agricultural community, the most agricultural, of any of the regional LGAs that were visited as part of this project.

It also has an ageing community, though many local stakeholders highlighted the number of younger families that have recently moved into the area, because of potential job opportunities. Its median age is 50, 9 years higher than the median age for SA, 41.[19]

3.2 Digital inclusion (Australian Digital Inclusion Index)

According to the ADII, KEM LGA is likely to have a much lower level of digital inclusion, than the rest of the state. It is 7.1 points behind the stage average, on its overall score (64.9 vs. 72), and, as is consistently the case with regional local governments, the gap is largest, on the digital ability index, a 10.3-point difference (51.7 vs. 62).

Among regional LGAs, KEM ranks 36th, among SA's 51 regional Councils.

Table 9: Australian Digital Inclusion Index Scores – Karoonda East Murray LGA

Measure of digital inclusion	KEM score	State average	National average
Digital ability	51.7	62	64.9
Digital access	65	70	72
Digital affordability	93.7	95	95
Overall digital inclusion score	64.9	72	73.2

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[19] Australian Bureau of Statistics: https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/SAL40670, accessed August 6, 2023.

3.3 Overview of digital inclusion services in Karoonda East Murray Council

Digital inclusion services available in the KEM LGA are summarised in Table 10. The Karoonda School-Community Library is the sole digital inclusion service provider, with respecting to providing advice and assistance to community members having difficulties navigating the online world, or using their devices.

It also provides free WiFi and free public PCs, while the local Council has some free WiFi areas and charging points, in various parts of the township.

Table 10: Digital Inclusion Services – Karoonda East Murray LGA

Digital inclusion service providers	Ability-related services	Access-related services
Karoonda SCL	• Digital drop-in support • *Previously: hosted digital classes ran by staff from Murray Bridge Library*	• Free public WiFi • Public PCs
Karoonda Post Office		• Public PC for accessing Centrelink/MyGov services
Other DI services		• Other free WiFi access points and charging points available in Karoonda Town Centre

3.4 Local case-study

Needing to travel to Adelaide for digital literacy classes

The lack of ongoing digital skills classes in Karoonda led to one Age Pensioner regularly driving down to Adelaide to complete a computer course, provided by WEA Adult Learning, at a cost of $230, excluding travel expenses, something he felt he needed, for both some casual, ongoing employment, and for his community work.

That was not a minor expense – as he put it:

"We had to look at the cost of the course, and then tighten our belts in a few other areas"

They felt there was nothing in Murray Bridge that was at a suitably-basic level to meet their level of skill, meaning they had no choice, they felt, but to regularly head to Adelaide.

3.5 Digital inclusion obstacle: need for collaboration with larger regional libraries

Karoonda SCL, like most of the 33 school-community libraries across regional SA, operates on limited staffing. There are two employees at Karoonda School-Library, both of whom split their roles between teaching duties, and librarian duties.

In practical terms, this means that for most of the week, there is only one staff member in a public-facing role, who is free to interact with community members, at any one time.

Staff from Murray Bridge Library previously ran classes at Karoonda SCL, in 2022, and these were fairly well-received, with reasonable numbers attending relative to the size of the community. Disappointingly, these classes were unable to be continued this year, due to some administrative hurdles.

Collaboration between larger and smaller regional libraries to roll-out digital skills classes, is an essential part of building digital ability in SA's smallest regional communities, so it is very unfortunate that the partnership between these two libraries could not be continued into 2023.

4. Mount Gambier

4.1 The local context

Mount Gambier, SA's largest regional centre, offers an important contrast to the other three regional LGAs outlined above.

Unlike the other local governments featured in these snapshots – Yorke Peninsula, Peterborough, and Karoonda East Murray -- Mount Gambier does not have a significantly older population, relative to the state average. Its median age is 41, the same as the median age for the state.[20]

4.2 Digital inclusion (Australian Digital Inclusion Index)

Despite being SA's largest regional town, Mount Gambier is, according to the ADII, likely to still be well below the SA average for digital inclusion, being 5 points behind the overall state score (67 vs. 72), as seen in Table 11.

Among regional LGAs in SA, 14 of them are likely to perform better on digital inclusion than Mount Gambier, while 36 regional LGAs are likely to perform worse.

Table 11: Australian Digital Inclusion Index Scores – Mount Gambier LGA

Measure of digital inclusion	Mt Gambier score	State average	National average
Digital ability	55.6	62	64.9
Digital access	65.9	70	72
Digital affordability	94.2	95	95
Overall digital inclusion score	67	72	73.2

4.3 Overview of digital inclusion services in Mount Gambier LGA

Digital inclusion services available in the Mount Gambier LGA are summarised in Table 12.

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[20] Australian Bureau of Statistics: https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA44620, accessed August 6, 2023.

Mount Gambier, as one of the largest regional centres in the state, has both one of the largest libraries in regional SA, and a range of community organisations that provide digital inclusion services to their clients, often representing and serving populations more likely to experience digital exclusion, such as people on very low incomes; Aboriginal people; and newly-arrived migrants and refugees.

Mount Gambier's library has a level of staffing that much smaller regional libraries – particularly the SCLs – do not have.

Mount Gambier also has a level of face-to-face provision of essential government and private services that does not exist in the Yorke Peninsula, Peterborough, or Karoonda.

Table 12: Digital Inclusion Services – Mount Gambier LGA

Digital inclusion service providers	Ability-related services	Access-related services
Mount Gambier Library	• Digital drop-in support • Weekly digital classes • Twice-a-week one-on-one sessions (must book beforehand)	• Free public WiFi • Public PCs • Loanable Ipads
Mount Gambier Community Centre	• Digital drop-in support, for clients	• *Previously: had a one-off allocation of laptops that were donated to clients*
Migrant and refugee digital inclusion services	• Digital drop-in support for clients (Australian Migrant Resource Centre/AMRC) • Digital classes (AMRC)	• Computer labs • *Previously: donated second-hand phones to clients Red Cross)*
Aboriginal digital inclusion services	• Digital drop-in support for clients (Pangula)	

4.4 Local case-study

The impacts of a donated device

A community member on the Disability Support Pension, living in public housing, was fortunate enough to receive a donated PC, via AC Care, who run the Mount Gambier Community Centre.

They previously had a very old laptop, very slow, with webpages taking a very long time to load, and a small screen that caused them huge discomfort, including migraines. They could not afford to replace this device.

Their new computer is much faster, allowing them to make quicker progress on their studies. They now feel confident about doing their Centrelink reporting online, something they struggled to do on their previous, very inadequate laptop. And it has a larger screen, increasing their level of physical comfort:

"I get less migraines, now that I have a bigger device, with a bigger screen"

Having a functional computer also means that they are able to do more of their studying, and other digital work, from home, instead of always having to head to the library, and book their PCs.

4.5 Digital inclusion obstacle: how to connect with the most disadvantaged and isolated community members

While Mount Gambier has a range of supports for community members experiencing digital inclusion, a far greater breadth than the smallest and most isolated communities in regional SA, these services are generally tied to being a member of a particular demographic, and being a client of the organisation.

The main public digital inclusion service in town is the library. Mount Gambier's library is quite centrally and prominently situated, but there are many community members experiencing poverty and isolation, who are digitally-excluded, and who are not accessing the library's digital inclusion services – services that would build their digital ability, and make it easier to access the online world.

This, is the despite the proactive efforts of library staff, who have reached out to local organisations that work more closely with some of the most socially-disadvantaged residents.

For instance, many job-seekers with limited digital ability, a significant disadvantage for such essential tasks as job-searching, studying or training, or interacting with the MyGov portal, were not aware of the digital drop-in support and classes available at the library, or seemed reluctant to take-up these supports. Similarly, those with limited access to data or devices were not always comfortable about using the public PCs available at the library.

These challenges are not unique to Mount Gambier: there are multiple obstacles that prevent or discourage the most isolated and disadvantaged digitally-excluded community members from accessing supports, particularly at their library, which, in much of regional SA, is either the primary or the sole location, for digital inclusion services.

E: Findings: What We Heard from Regional SA

The following is a summary of the key themes that emerged from our consultations, divided into two sections:

> **1) Being digitally-excluded in regional SA**
> **2) Being a digital inclusion service in regional SA**

Being digitally-excluded in regional SA

1. Poor connectivity and reception continue to cause huge challenges

Limited or unreliable connectivity and reception remain widespread complaints in regional SA, particularly for community members who live outside towns, although issues are also present in some smaller towns. We heard that levels of connection and reception are often poor, even a short distance from a built-up area. For example, we were told by a community worker that even 20 minutes outside of Mount Gambier:

"Internet connection dramatically declines"

Many community members felt disadvantaged by very poor connectivity and reception at home and at work, causing at best inconvenience, at worst, potentially life-threatening situations.

A small business owner in Karoonda, who needed access to a quality, reliable internet connection to do important administrative and book-keeping work, felt frequently inconvenienced and frustrated by slow internet speeds. On the Yorke Peninsula, we heard from one member of a small town whose neighbour needed an ambulance, but, due to poor reception in their home, needed to walk down the street, until they regained the phone signal. A JobSeeker and student in Terowie felt discouraged from studying by very slow internet speeds.

2. Different forms of digital exclusion are compounding each other

While we usually think of 'access', 'ability', and 'affordability', as distinct measures of digital inclusion, in people's everyday lives, they intersect, and this was evident in our consultations, where many community members felt discouraged from even attempting to go online because of poor connectivity.

Those with limited access to data and devices tended to find it harder to become and stay digitally capable, depriving them of opportunities to build their familiarity with the digital world, and self-teach.

Put simply, the harder it is to get online, the less time you are able to spend online, the harder it will be for you to become and remain digitally confident and capable. As an Age Pensioner and community advocate from Karoonda put it:

"You cannot expect people to use the technology, when the available technology is barely adequate"

Similarly, community members who were mobile-only were greatly disadvantaged when it came to building their digital ability as online interactions were often slower and more frustrating, particularly if the phone was a poor-quality, older device. As one Jobseeker from Terowie stated:

"Been a long time since I've had the chance to use a computer…you forget, you deskill"

3. **Regional job-seekers hard-hit by affordability of devices and data**

We saw a similar linkage between affordability and the other components of digital exclusion. At the most basic level, if you cannot afford devices and data you will not have digital access and the issue of skill-levels becomes redundant. In our research, most Age Pensioners did not indicate that affordability of data and devices was a concern for them, but among people on JobSeeker (mostly over the age of 50), who were on a lower income, with higher housing costs, this was a critical issue. As one Terowie JobSeeker bluntly put it:

"You chew up your data, which chews up your food budget"

While they varied in terms of device ownership, many JobSeekers we spoke to were mobile-only, some had other devices (but little access to data), and some had devices that were too old or dysfunctional to use. As one JobSeeker from Mount Gambier, who used a rent-to-buy scheme (Snaffle), to purchase a laptop, pointed out:

"By the time we've paid off the device, it's already out of date"

Similarly, many JobSeekers had lower-cost but poor value data plans, including pre-paid plans. Many went without data, or ran out of data early. This created a lack of access, and a concern about how much data certain background apps were using (which also speaks to the need for further digital literacy training around how to manage data usage).

Being a digital inclusion service in regional SA

4. **The loss of face-to-face services from government, banks, and telcos in regional communities has created an increased need for digital inclusion support, with libraries and community centres increasingly stretched to meet needs**

Regional SA, much like the rest of regional Australia, has been hard-hit by the withdrawal of face-to-face services, including banks, telcos, and state and federal government offices. The withdrawal of face-to-face service provision means increased pressures to engage with these services digitally, i.e., online, or over-the-phone.

Compounding these pressures is this fact that many of the institutions that are physically withdrawing from regional SA are doing very little to build the community's digital ability and access.

In this environment, regional libraries and community hubs are finding themselves playing the huge and intense role of digital jack-of-all-trades, including having to support customers to digitally access many government and non-government services.

These pressures exist, even when there may still be a face-to-face banking or telco presence in town. As one regional community centre staff member put it:

"Still two banks in town, but the banks are still sending people to us"

a. Government services

In the regions, community centres, in particular, are having to put significant staff or volunteer time into assisting people with a wide range of government interactions, including:

- Applying for income support payments
- Reporting fortnightly income, and job-search and other activity-requirements, for job-seekers
- Setting-up for telehealth appointments
- Passport applications and photos

However, most online government services take insufficient account of the needs of the most digitally-excluded community members who are likely to be reliant on their mobile phone for access to the online world. This not only made it harder for them to access services online, but also meant that digital inclusion workers would need to spend longer assisting them. As an Age Pensioner from Karoonda put it:

"A lot of people wouldn't know how to setup their phone for Centrelink and My Gov"

An experienced digital inclusion coach on the Yorke Peninsula added:

"People designing government apps aren't considering the quality of people's phones"

b. Banking

The closure of regional bank branches was a source of huge anger across regional communities, particularly when there was little advance notice and consultation. There were mixed views around online banking: while some community members had adjusted to online banking, others were very hesitant or suspicious, or simply did not sufficient confident or digital ability to utilise this service.

Generally, the older community members were, the more unlikely they were to do their banking through an app or website. Among people in the 75+ age group, where levels of digital confidence and capability tend to dramatically fall, users of online banking were almost non-existent.

Many older community members used the local post office as a face-to-face option for banking and bill-paying, where this was available, noting it was a limited option, and not an option for all bank customers (for instance, ANZ customers were unable to use Australia Post offices for banking). In some parts of regional SA, the local post office may be much further away and less accessible than in Adelaide or the larger towns.

c. Telecommunications

Many community members shared frustrations about the lack of support provided to regional consumers by telco retailers. Telecommunication equipment and services are sold online or through generic local retailers (such as post offices), but with no follow-up support. This issue is most deeply experienced in the smallest regional communities, where telco retailers have either never existed, or have recently disappeared.

There are repercussions not only for consumers, but also digital inclusion service providers, who are being expected to assist with phone setup and maintenance issues.

Retailers are regularly telling customers who had purchased new phones to go to their local library (or, in some cases, local community centre) for assistance with phone setup and SIM card registration. This was especially true where the retailer was not a telco at all, but rather the post office, who likely did not have the staff capacity or the expertise to assist with these matters.

Some older consumers felt overwhelmed by the wide, complex range of phone and internet plans, and with limited face-to-face options for seeking advice, would sometimes turn to a trusted library or community centre staff member, for feedback. As an Age Pensioner from Peterborough commented:

"When I buy a new phone, they give you no instructions. The library helps with phone setup."

5. Regional libraries and community centres are not adequately resourced to meet current demand for digital inclusion support

a. Staff skills, capacity

The sheer diversity of digital inquiries, as we have seen, is a strain on confidence and skill, for some staff. As a library worker at a larger library explained:

"Not sure we had the full skillset to help everyone who came in wanting help"

Facing particular pressure were the school-community libraries, that have very limited staffing capacity. Staff generally have to split their time between their teaching duties and their public duties.

Often, there is only one staff member in a public-facing role at a time, with limited time to assist community members with diverse digital queries, and even less time for the staff to be able to digitally-upskill themselves (and stay digitally-upskilled).

As a SCL librarian explained:

"I'm here by myself, a majority of the time"

Another SCL employee added:

"You're in a constant state of flux, constantly hurrying to get work done"

b. Adequacy of funding

SCL staff not having the capacity to meet the digital inclusion role that many community members expect of them, or the capacity to upskill to successfully play that role, is partly a product of their size and funding.

SCLs exist in locations that otherwise would not have the population or revenue-base to sustain library infrastructure. But they also exist in the smallest of communities, places that are most likely to be lacking in face-to-face services such as government offices and banking and telco facilities.

This means there is often greater pressure to play the 'digital jack-of-all-trades' role and increases reliance on larger regional libraries being able to assist with running dedicated classes in SCL facilities.

SCLs and other very small libraries and community centres struggle when funding for digital services is apportioned on a per capita basis that takes little account of the needs of particular communities and the increased costs (relatively) faced by very small services.

For example, when a one-off fund of $1 million was allocated for the statewide 'Being Digital' program (taken, incidentally, from libraries' normal collection budgets), the funds available for the smallest Councils and smallest libraries, due to funding being allocated, per capita, was, in some cases, only a few hundred dollars.

Funding allocations this small made it extremely difficult to bolster staffing to be able provide additional digital inclusion services, like classes, or extended drop-in times.

Indeed, for many school-community libraries, even purchasing devices was not possible.

One school-community librarian, in SA's mid-north, noted that their SCL's funding allocation was $333 – barely the cost of an iPad. Another SCL librarian observed:

"It was literally just a few hundred dollars for digital inclusion"

Regional community centres playing digital inclusion support roles, for instance, supporting customers to access state and federal government services online, also felt under-resourced.

For example: that the expected hours of support work they were funded for, through the Services Australia Agent grant, was far less than the amount of support work they needed to do, due to customers having limited digital skills, or being slowed down by being mobile-only (see the discussion about Southern Yorke Peninsula Community Hub, Section C).

Another instance of funding arrangements not matching the on-the-ground role being performed: some community centres reported that when reporting back to funders, they had to count the number of individuals they had supported, but that there was no way to include the number of individuals who had engaged multiple times with an organisation, which downplayed how much time and effort was being spent on digital inclusion work.

6. **Libraries and community centres face multiple other challenges relating to engaging digitally-excluded community members – tackling these will require *both adequate resourcing and creativity***

This final finding highlights several different challenges faced by regional libraries and community centres trying to engage people experiencing digital exclusion.

These challenges vary: from building public awareness of existing services, to preferences about learning models, to how feelings of shame and stigma, and the experience of poverty and marginalisation, can prevent people from engaging with particular institutions.

Responding to these challenges will require not only greater resourcing, but some creativity, in how and where digital inclusion services are provided.

a. *There is still a lack of awareness of the supports available*

Despite concerted efforts to promote local digital inclusion offerings, through online and offline means, awareness of digital inclusion supports among those needing them most – including older people, and job-seekers – was still often patchy.[21]

While the role of libraries has dramatically transformed, in many regional communities libraries were still often associated with their more traditional functions, such as book collections, and rather less so with their emerging – and now-substantial – digital inclusion roles. One Disability Support Pensioner commented (a comment that was far from uncommon):

"I didn't know the library had computer classes"

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[21] The challenges of how to effectively market digital inclusion services, in contexts where resources for advertising might be highly limited, has been a key topic for reflection in the 'Being Digital' Discovery Report (October 2022), and Final Report (March 2023), commissioned by Public Library Services, and produced by ThinkPlace.

School-community libraries face particular visibility challenges

The school-community library is a unique model, that allows for libraries to be shared between school children and the wider community, making it financially sustainable to maintain libraries in very small communities that otherwise would not have the populations or revenue bases to support such infrastructure.[22]

With these benefits, however, comes challenges, some of which relate to perceptions – or misperceptions – about the nature of SCLs, some of which relate to reduced visibility.

As school-community libraries operate within school grounds, often hidden or obscured from the street-front, they sometimes do not have the same public visibility that standard, standalone libraries would have. One Age Pensioner from Karoonda, very active in their local community, commented:

> *"Even after 4 years, it's hard to know where the [school-community] library is"*

Despite the efforts of library staff, and local Councils, there continue to be perceptions that SCLs are specifically, or primarily, for school children, and that other community members are less welcome. An Age Pensioner from Meningie, who regularly uses their school-community library's digital inclusion services, noted:

> *"We've got the library inside the school, but that's still a barrier for some"*

There may be a gendered component to this hesitation to utilise SCL facilities: several school-community librarians indicated that among men, there was more wariness about entering school-grounds to seek assistance from libraries on digital issues. A male Disability Support Pensioner from Peterborough commented:

> *"You feel out of place there"*

b. It can be difficult for support provided by libraries and community centres to match the learning needs or preferences of the digitally-excluded

Feedback on group classes, one-on-one support

Among community members experiencing digital exclusion there was generally a preference for a flexible, 'drop-in' model of digital support, as opposed to a more formal, skills program, such as group classes.

Many community members who had previously engaged with computer or digital classes expressed concerns about the speed and complexity of classes, which left them feeling disempowered at the end of the course, and no less digitally-unskilled than at the start.

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[22] For an exploration of the successes and the challenges faced by the innovative school-community library model, see Sarjeant-Jenkins, R., *School-community libraries of South Australia: The lived experience*, University of Saskatchewan, 2020.

They felt they needed a program that was more foundational, and much slower, to encourage them to participate in further classes.

As a consequence, many libraries and community centres found that the take-up of digital skills classes offered was lower than expected given the level of need in their communities. One staff member from a regional community centre commented:

"We did some classes, fairly low interest…people need more foundational content, basic internet skills, not ready for more advanced skills"

Despite this, there was recognition among many individuals participating in digital classes, and the staff running classes in libraries and community centres, of the benefits that social learning in the group setting affords, including forming new relationships and networks, and the opportunities to socialise with others after classes, and separately. As an Age Pensioner from Meningie put it:

"We've all gotten to know each other now"

These benefits were recognised by a librarian from a larger regional library:

"Definitely a huge social component…people who are now friends with each other, catch-up"

Although staff understood that many community members preferred drop-in digital support, providing this support was often quite time-intensive, with many queries requiring over 30-60 minutes of staff time to resolve, time they could not spend on their other work duties. The class-model, which was able to draw upon existing digital skills educational content, was generally seen by library and community centre staff as less taxing than the drop-in, one-on-one learning model.

As one regional community centre employee put it:

"That 5-minute job, so easily turns into a 50-minute job"

Some library and community centre staff feared that the drop-in assistance model was not always genuinely building digital skill, but rather acting as a kind of short-term, band-aid measure. Many staff expressed concerns that individuals, while having their digital grievances resolved, were not actually learning the skills to be able to independently resolve these grievances in the future, meaning that community members would have to repeatedly drop-in, to seek support over the same issue.

Stigma and shame about poor digital skills are real challenges for digital inclusion services

Among both community members, and library and community centre staff, there was recognition that for many, feelings of embarrassment or shame about low levels of digital ability would discourage people from seeking assistance. As a Yorketown Age Pensioner noted:

"People fear looking stupid, shown for not having IT skills"

While this factor – the fear of being shown up, in front of others, for having poor digital ability – had particular relevance for digital skills classes, it was also a deterrent for community members who could benefit from one-on-one digital support.

COVID is still a significant fear for many community members

Library and community centre staff generally commented on the fact that, even over three years on from the start of the COVID pandemic, visitor numbers were still below, in some cases, markedly below, pre-COVID visitor levels. Library customers, and particularly, many of those individuals who would likely most benefit from digital skills classes and digital drop-in services, especially in some regional communities, are quite likely to be older people, in the 65+ and 75+ age-groups. That is, the age demographic most vulnerable and most likely to be concerned about COVID.

As a staff member from a larger regional library observed:

"We still haven't recovered from COVID, in terms of visitor numbers"

c. **For some people, libraries (and community centres) might not always be the best <u>physical setting</u> for providing digital inclusion support**

For many marginalised people with high digital inclusion needs, who were both socially excluded and socially anxious, engaging with libraries was a significant personal challenge, especially for people who had no prior relationship with their local library, who had never engaged with *any* of their library's services, digital or otherwise.

This was more of an issue for the larger, standalone libraries in major regional centres, such as Mount Gambier and Port Pirie, where the scale, number of people in the library, and level of activity, could be intimidating to some. As a social worker in regional SA observed:

"It's just not a place [our clients] would go, it's very modern, very busy, very large"

For some highly-disadvantaged community members, libraries generally – and school-community libraries, especially – had an association with school, an institution that was not a source of welcoming and comfortable memories for those whose schooling years were very difficult.

The aversion to settings that were reminiscent of schools was also part of the reason why classes, with their formal, school-like structure, were not always enticing learning models for community members needing to increase their digital ability.

A related barrier to engaging with digital inclusion services – particularly libraries – for highly-disadvantaged people was written literacy. People who are illiterate, or have poor or

limited literacy, might find libraries to be an intimidating, alienating environment, despite the efforts of library staff to generate a friendly and supportive atmosphere.

Concerns about privacy

Computers in libraries (and, often, in community centres) tend to be in public places (for sensible reasons). However, anyone needing to use computers for confidential or private matters may be deterred. There are basic problems of just the public visibility of the computer screens, and in addition the need, in order to access Centrelink or MyGov services, or banking, to input passwords, financial and personal information on public computers and IT networks where a user does not know and cannot guarantee the security of the data.

Relatedly, while there were a very small number of community members who had indicated that they had used public library or community centre PCs for telehealth appointments, understandably, most people did not regard this as an acceptable option, given the obvious privacy implications.

Beyond this legitimate worry, some library staff who were assisting community members to access essential services online were concerned about being put in situations where they would potentially have access to private or confidential information.

For instance, a customer may ask a library staff member to help them print a form that is needed for a Centrelink matter, and give the library worker their log-in details, so they can log-in to MyGov on the customer's behalf. Alternatively, a community member may ask a library worker to log-in to their online banking portal, and alarmingly, hand over their password, and other log-in details.

These situations put library staff in a difficult position, well beyond their boundaries of their role, as library staff should not have access to the confidential personal, government, or financial details of community members. As one concerned staff member from a larger regional library put it:

"We can't help you with that, that's your personal details, that's sensitive info"

Feedback from parents of infants, young children

Some parents of infants or very young children were not sure that accessing their local library – particularly, their local SCL – and utilising the free WiFi, or public PCs, would be practical for them.

A Young Mothers Group (a group for mothers of infants and newborns) on the Yorke Peninsula reported slow or unreliable internet connections in their own homes and therefore needed high quality public connectivity to reduce their digital exclusion.

What they thought would be more convenient was a more open, outdoor space, for instance, a park or a playground, with good, free, reliable WiFi, that they could use for accessing essential services, or catching-up on their studies.

Transport and mobility can be huge access barriers

In larger regional communities, or for people living in the rural and remote areas, well away from the nearest township, transport could be a significant obstacle to accessing local digital inclusion services.

Many of the larger regional libraries, such as Port Pirie library, are able to do some mobile digital inclusion work (for instance, Port Pirie library staff regularly hold digital drop-in services in Crystal Brook, part of the same LGA). There are also library outreach services in Kangaroo Island, and on parts of the Yorke Peninsula.

But these services are by no means universal across regional SA where distance from services increases the need for digital access while also preventing that access.

F: Recommendations for Building Regional Digital Inclusion

Addressing South Australia's regional digital divide will require significant investments that target persistent barriers relating to low digital confidence and skill, and limited access to devices and data.

There is, of course, an urgent need for further investment, at state and federal level, to address both connectivity and reception blackspots across regional SA, and the affordability of internet access for people on the lowest incomes, and there remains a pressing need for a whole-of-government digital inclusion strategy, towards which initial steps were taken, under the previous state government.

However, the recommendations we make here, consistent with the focus of this project, are directed to the state government, and largely relate to the work of libraries and community centres, as facilitators of digital inclusion across regional SA, though we note there is a range of measures, outside the scope of this report, that would improve digital inclusion outcomes.

Funding to tackle SA's significant and stubborn regional digital divide will need to be long-term and ongoing, rather than the one-off programs of the past – such as 'Being Digital' – and funding will need to be targeted at those regional communities and those populations that are most digitally-excluded, rather than simply on a per capita basis.

With that noted, we propose the following recommendations, under the following three broad themes:

<u>Skill and Confidence</u>
1) State government provides ongoing funding for drop-in services and community education
2) State government provides funding for mobile and roaming digital inclusion services

<u>Access to Devices and Data</u>
3) State government ensures that 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, and related facilities
4) State government provides funding for targeted device-loaning and data-loaning programs

<u>Fair Funding for Regional Digital Inclusion</u>
5) State government provides significant new investment in regional digital inclusion services, primarily (but not necessarily only) through libraries and community centres
6) Treasury develops (or funds the development of) a new funding model to allocate this funding in the fairest, most effective fashion

Each of these recommendations will be explored, below.

Finally, at the very end of this section, we have some recommendations for local governments, and for the Local Government Association, as the peak body representing SA's 68 local Councils.

Skill and Confidence

No matter where people live, whether they are in a major regional centre, or a small township, or live rurally or remotely, everyone should have access to supports to help them troubleshoot online and device-related issues, and programs to build their digital confidence and skill.

1) Ongoing funding for drop-in services and community education

State governments should ensure that every regional Local Government Area has sufficient funding to provide both a regular drop-in service for community members needing advice and assistance, and, where there is need, other digital education and training activities. Both of these are essential to any strategy to bolster digital ability in regional SA.

It is essential that funding be continuous and long-term, rather than short-term injections of resource. Becoming digitally-able is not a one-off process, but an ongoing challenge, since the online world keeps evolving, and so the essential skills needed to participate in this world keep shifting, meaning there is always the risk of falling behind, even if you are currently digitally-skilled.

Local governments should be empowered to coordinate these supports, bringing together libraries, community hubs, and other relevant community stakeholders, to ensure that there is staffing capacity, suitable physical space, and appropriate ICT equipment available.

Small regional Councils where staffing is limited could explore collaboration opportunities with neighbouring Councils, which may be more efficient and sustainable, building on and learning from existing partnerships.

For instance, the Star Club Field Officer, a role seeking to promote grassroots sporting and recreational activity, is an initiative that is shared between multiple neighbouring regional Councils, and the state government's Office of Recreation, Sport, and Racing, and could be a model of collaboration worth exploring or adapting for use in the digital inclusion space.

And of course, there is already collaboration across regional LGAs, among library branches, coordinated by Public Library Services.

Why this is needed

Digital skills classes – tailored to varying levels and subjects, including a focus on foundational skills, navigating government online portals, and job-ready skills – and digital drop-in support cater to different digital needs, and funding arrangements need to recognise the value of both forms of support.

They have complementary purposes: drop-in support can provide quick, responsive assistance, while often, classes provide a deeper response to low ability that genuinely builds people's ability to independently navigate the digital world.

Challenges

Drop-in support can be very labour-intensive

There is no doubt that drop-in support – particularly when it is unscheduled visits from community members seeking assistance – can be quite time-intensive, and that the wide range of digital queries can be quite challenging for library and community centre staff (and volunteers).

It is essential that staffing arrangements recognise how intensive this work can be, and that there be sufficient time allocated to not only to play this role, while also meeting other role requirements, but also to ensure that staff can properly upskill themselves, that they feel sufficiently confident in their own abilities as digital inclusion trouble-shooters.

Take-up of classes can be very modest

Some regional libraries and community centres have felt discouraged by the low take-up of classes. Some of the barriers to community members participating in classes can be addressed through a model that takes digital inclusion work on the road and engages with population groups that may not easily engage with supports in library or community centre settings, as addressed in the next recommendation.

2) Mobile and roaming digital inclusion services

We know that there are populations experiencing digital exclusion who are not accessing existing digital inclusion services.

Therefore, funding should be allocated, including for both staffing costs and travelling costs, for mobile and outreach digital inclusion services that can:

a) visit areas where there might not be a library or community hubs available
b) lead awareness-raising work with digitally-excluded communities that might not be engaging with existing digital inclusion services

Why this is needed

For many people in regional SA, as previously discussed, there are significant barriers to engaging with the digital inclusion offerings provided by libraries and community centres, such as:

- Distance and mobility
- Hesitation about engaging with libraries generally, and school-community libraries particularly, for reasons such as:

- o Schools sometimes having unwelcome associations for some people, for example, by reminding people of their past negative experiences with schooling/formal education
- o School-community libraries sometimes having access/accessibility issues – for many people, having to enter the school grounds, to access the library, is a genuine disincentive
- Reasons relating to social exclusion or isolation
- Fear or suspicion about the digital world
- Embarrassment or shame about having low levels of digital ability

Empowering libraries and community centres to be able to do mobile and outreach work, and engage community members in settings outside the library or community centre building, could be a powerful way of building awareness, local relationships, and overcoming some of the barriers listed above.

Challenges

How to roll this out in sparse, isolated, areas

There are many examples of mobile local services in sparse regions. But to generate economies of scale, mobile digital inclusion hubs could potentially be incorporated into other mobile community, health, and local government services.

Neighbouring regional Councils could potentially pool resources and staffing to be able to coordinate this work, across local government areas.

Access to Devices and Data

Every person should have reasonable access to the tools they need to access the online world, including stable, reliable internet access, and suitable devices.

It is increasingly understood that individuals who are mobile-only are significantly disadvantaged, with respect to interacting with government portals and other services online, and participating in other essential activities, such as job-seeking, studying and training, and applying for rentals.

As Julian Thomas, Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society put it:

> *"We are past the stage where one device can do everything online"*[23]

Limited access to devices and data, because of a lack of funds, was a clear concern among some of the lowest-income people in regional SA, particularly job-seekers, who were under great pressure to engage with services online, due to the loss of face-to face institutions, but this barrier to inclusion can be addressed.

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[23] Presentation at the launch of the *2022 Australian Digital Inclusion Index*, Adelaide, July 18, 2023.

3) 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, and related facilities

Governments should invest in WiFi and PC hubs, which, for many very small communities, would likely be very small spaces.

These spaces, potentially, could also provide neutral bases for mobile and outreach digital inclusion services, that could travel out to more isolated areas from larger regional communities.

Why this is needed

It is unreasonable to expect that community members with limited access to data or devices should be required to travel great distances to access facilities, such as libraries and community centres, where free internet, PCs, and other facilities are available, particularly if they are community members living on very low incomes, or living with a disability or serious health issue.

Challenges

Cost, space

The cost of establishing these spaces is unlikely to be prohibitive. Most regional communities have a public-WiFi zones, and only some communities would need a small space for placing public PCs, and other facilities. Local Councils are generally very well-placed to identify suitable, vacant spaces, that could be appropriate sites for these digital hubs, and could coordinate with local community organisations.

4) Targeted device-loaning and data-loaning programs, administered through regional libraries and community centres

Regional libraries and community centres should be provided with the resources to purchase and maintain devices (for example, tablets) that could be lent-out to eligible customers or community members, with data (for example, mobile SIM cards) included where necessary.

Why this is needed

While libraries and community centres, and other local facilities, through their provision of free public Wi-Fi, and public PCs, improve the community's ability to access essential data and devices, this cannot be the full solution to limited access to devices and data.

Trials of device-loaning and data-loaning programs overseas[24] have identified several benefits arising from community members being able to borrow devices and data to take home for their own use, including:

- Privacy and Confidentiality: Community members can participate in online activities that they would rather not do in an open, public space, such as completing personal government forms, banking, bill-paying, and other digital interactions involving private or personal information.

- Convenience: Community members can work on digital tasks, in their own space, in their own time, without having to travel to libraries or community centres, and without being bound by restrictions like operating hours, or time limits on PCs usage.

- Self-learning: Unlimited access to a device and data – during the loan period – gives community members opportunities to familiarise themselves with the online world, an essential part of self-learning, which participants in programs have reported is an important part of how they developed their digital skills.

Access to data and devices is a key part of being able to build the skills to being able to independently and effectively go online, as many digital inclusion training organisations recognise.[25] Access and ability are deeply interconnected.

There are a handful of metropolitan libraries that provide loanable devices to community members. For school-students there are both device-loaning and data-loaning programs: clear precedents for further expanding these schemes.[26] One SA library that has pioneered device-lending for customers, including being able to take those devices home, is Port Adelaide Enfield.

Users of device-lending services who were interviewed for this project spoke about the sense of empowerment and convenience that came from having a functioning device, that was not a mobile phone, that they could use in the privacy of their own home, as well as being able to bring the device with them when they travelled to engagements.

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[24] Dixon, K., *Local communities and the internet ecosystem: Scaling solutions to data poverty in the UK*, prepared for Good Things Foundation UK, 2022, is an important exploration of different approaches to tackling data poverty (and device poverty), in the UK, particularly pgs. 31-36 ('WiFi in a Box'), and pgs. 42-45 ('SIM card distribution').

[25] Good Things Foundation noted that 1/3 (32%) of their regional partner organisations that provide digital advice and assistance report that their clients' lack of access to data and devices at home is a barrier to building digital ability. Good Things Foundation Australia, *Submission to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review*, 2021, pg. 18.

[26] Since 2018, the Department of Education has supported secondary schools to provide laptops to senior students whose families cannot provide a suitable device for their children to do schoolwork. In most of these instances, schools allow children to bring their devices home. On the data-loaning front, there is the School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI), a federal government program, and the Student Home Internet Program, a government program.

They highlighted the increased confidence and capability that came from greater exposure to online platforms and the advantages of being able to play-around and teach themselves how to navigate the online world in their own time.

One user, a Disability Pensioner, noted that her borrowed device had:

"Big impact on confidence and skill, am always on the device, always searching, I am always learning"

Another user, an Age Pensioner, commented:

"Certainly gave me the confidence, I played around with the device, got familiar with it"

Challenges

Administrative difficulties

Device-loaning and data-loaning schemes face some administrative challenges. Devices need to be reset, cleaned, and setup, every time they are borrowed. There is a need to ensure that no content from previous users is on the device. Data-loaning schemes that rely on mobile SIM cards for data involve library or community staff potentially having to repeatedly liaise with telcos and work through sometimes complex registration requirements.

There are some options for minimising these administrative burdens, especially for SA's smallest regional libraries and community centres. The roll-out of these programs could be coordinated between neighbouring local government areas, which would likely make the administrative work necessary for these programs manageable, and make easier any interactions with telcos.

For the libraries sector another option could be for these programs to be coordinated at a state-wide level through Public Library Services, building on their existing central coordinating role for library services across the state.

Obtaining devices, data

Given the State Government is working to digitise the delivery of many government services, it should be a state government responsibility to properly fund digital inclusion supports throughout the libraries and community centres sector. This must include funding to purchase a reasonable number of devices to meet the needs of those on the lowest incomes. However, there are huge opportunities to tap into the corporate sector, as a source of surplus, second-hand devices.

There is no doubt that across corporate and government offices[27] are significant numbers of unused and unneeded laptops and other devices. There are already promising examples of surplus digital devices being collected, repurposed, and transferred to charities, school-students, and people in crisis.[28]

With some degree of coordination and resourcing – which should happen at a state level, rather than being left to individual Councils and other local bodies – there is certainly potential for surplus devices to be incorporated into a state-wide device-loaning program.

Fair Funding for Regional Digital Inclusion

We have seen that in recent years the state government has invested significantly in improving its IT capacity through the Digital Restart Fund and the Digital Investment Fund, but that these investments do not address digital exclusion in the wider community.

Clearly, given the findings of this report, more investment is required to support institutions like libraries and community centres that are at the front line of providing digital access and supporting digital skills-building in the community.

The investment required from the state government here is in the same order of magnitude of some of its other digital improvement investments. What is needed is new investment, probably in the scale of several or tens of millions across regional South Australia and not, as occurred with the funding for Being Digital, a million allocated from existing funds.

However, a new funding model is also needed to ensure that the money invested makes a difference to digital inclusion supports and does not leave particular regions or communities behind.

Why this is needed

Current funding for regional digital inclusion programs is not only inadequate, but it is not funded in a systematic fashion. The Good Things Foundation's 'Be Connected' program allocates funding based on grant applications, a process which does not guarantee a fair distribution or necessarily support areas of highest need. The libraries' 'Being Digital' funding was a small amount to begin with, and as we saw, the model of per capita funding resulted in many cases in very small allocations to regional libraries which did not allow for an expansion of services.

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[27] Indeed, there is already a very small device-donating program, within the South Australian government, but only for community organisations, with applicants limited to 1-2 devices, per application. https://www.sa.gov.au/topics/family-and-community/community-organisations/information-and-resources/digital-donation-program

[28] For instance, Work Ventures provided donated laptops, at low-cost, to young job-seekers, students, and community organisations; ITShare have a similar program, targeted broadly at people on low-incomes; The Good360 program helps the corporate sector to donate a wide range of goods to people in hardship, including digital devices with a national target of 100,000 donated laptops (and 1 million laptops pledged for donation), by 2025; and Optus has long-running programs for customers to both donate their unneeded phones, and donate their unneeded data.

Challenges

It is not within the scope of this report to fully cost a regional digital inclusion program, not least because the needs and existing levels of services and resources is different in each community. In terms of the size of investment needed we note that with digital technologies changing and requiring new skills, any new investment will have to be adjusted over time. Crucially, whatever level of new investment the government decides is appropriate at any point must not be allocated on a flat rate per capita, per LGA or per region basis. Rather (a little like the GST allocation between states), a funding formula is required that takes into account the following factors:

- Differing levels of community resources
- Different types of need in the community
- Regional and local demographics
- Remoteness, and the level of access and costs of non-digital service alternatives

Accordingly, we recommend that:

5) State government provides significant new investment in regional digital inclusion services, primarily (but not necessarily only) through libraries and community centres

6) Treasury develops (or funds the development of) a new funding model to allocate this funding in the fairest and most effective fashion

Recommendations for Local Government

While it will take a substantial investment from the state government to provide the broad range of digital inclusion supports needed to close SA's regional digital divide, we also know that the nature of these supports will vary from community to community depending on local challenges, needs, and existing community and digital inclusion infrastructure.

The leadership of local Councils will be essential. Therefore we recommend that:

7) Regional local Councils work with local libraries, community centres, and other relevant stakeholders, to map out existing digital inclusion supports, some of the challenges faced by digital inclusion services, and how these services can be further promoted

We also recommend to the Local Government Association of SA, in its role as an advocate, coordinator, and awareness-raiser for the local government sector, that:

8) LGASA explore potential barriers to collaboration on digital inclusion services between larger and small regional Councils, and identify solutions to facilitate larger and smaller local governments working more closely together in this space

9) LGASA incorporate the recommendations in this report into its existing advocacy work

G: Appendices

Appendix 1: Background and Methodology

This project was originally designed to be centred on three regional local government areas: the Yorke Peninsula, Karoonda East Murray, and Peterborough. These areas were chosen as they were identified in the Australian Digital Inclusion Index, as likely to have particularly low levels of digital inclusion, because of their geographic and demographic profile. Mount Gambier was added to the project to give a greater diversity of Council areas, given it is further from Adelaide, but based on a larger regional city with a more diverse population base.

While these four areas were the focus of this report, we also did consultation, both face-to-face, and remote, with people in other regional areas to identify whether the issues arising in our focus areas were relevant more widely or specific to those areas. In the end, eight local government areas were visited for interviews, between April and June of 2023. Along with follow-up phone-calls and Zoom-calls with interviewees from these areas, there were also remote interviews with individuals and organisations from other regional Council areas.

These interviews constituted the primary research methodology for this project, although SACOSS also brought to the project the knowledge and experience from previous research and advocacy on digital inclusion issues. SACOSS has been part of the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance since its inception, has produced two major *Connectivity Costs* research reports on telecommunications affordability,[29] and has been a key stakeholder in the Australian Digital Inclusion Index and the SA government's digital inclusion strategy.

The interviews for this project were designed to get a cross-section of views from each of communities visited. In each area we spoke to community members, older people, largely Age Pensioners, and people on low-incomes, about their levels of digital connectedness, the challenges they face, and their experience of digital inclusion services.

The mix of people varied in different local areas depending in part on who we were able to connect with. For our visit to Mount Gambier, and for our second of two visits to Peterborough, there was a deliberate targeting of consultation with job-seekers, as these perspectives were not well-represented in consultation in other regions.

In the Yorke Peninsula and Karoonda East Murray, we spoke mainly to Age Pensioners, and Age Pensioners also dominated, with respect to our remote interviews with community members, whereas in Mount Gambier and Peterborough, our consultations were with a mix of Age Pensioners, and job-seekers.

A further, critical part of the project was interviews with library and community centre staff in each region. These interviews focused on their understandings of the digital inclusion

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[29] The first *Connectivity Costs* report (2016) focused on affordability for people on Centrelink incomes, while the second report (2020) focused on those in waged poverty, that is, households on very low incomes but whose main source of income is wages.

issues in their communities, how they were seeking to address those issues, and the barriers and opportunities in providing the appropriate services. Similarly, where appropriate and available, other stakeholders were consulted on both issues and services.

Over the full course of the project, 91 community members were interviewed, along with 23 staff from 17 libraries, 15 staff or volunteers from 12 community centres, as well as Council staff, and other local and regional stakeholders (see Appendix 2, for a full list of consultations).

Throughout the project, recourse was also made to a stakeholder Reference Group, which consisted of service providers in each focus region, as well as Adelaide-based staff of Public Library Services and of Community Centres SA, along with digital inclusion researchers and advocates. The reference group guided the project and helped form the recommendations, but were also expert informants in their own right.

The full list of Reference Group members is in Appendix 3, and while we thank them for their contributions, SACOSS bears full responsibility for this report and all recommendations made.

Appendix 2: Summary of Consultations

Below is a summary of community and professional engagements – both face-to-face, and remote – undertaken over several months during the first half of 2023 as part of this project.

Consultations with community members

There were a total of 91 interviews with regional community members (excluding staff and volunteers from organisations), 83 of which were face-to-face, 8 of which were remote.

These engagements included conversations with:

- Users of library digital inclusion services – almost exclusively Age Pensioners
- Users of community centre digital inclusion services – almost exclusively Age Pensioners
- Individuals who considered themselves to have difficulties interacting with the digital world – composed of a majority of Age Pensioners, but with a significant minority of Job-seekers, concentrated in Mount Gambier, and the Peterborough area
- Young mothers

Interactions were a mix of formal group/one-on-one interviews, and less formal, social gatherings.

In addition to these regional consultations, there were interviews with 3 community members, living in Adelaide, who provided feedback on the device-lending program operated by Port Adelaide Enfield library.

Consultations with regional library staff

Interviews were conducted – in some cases, multiple interviews – with 23 library staff, across 17 libraries and school-community libraries:

- Karoonda SCL
- Peterborough SCL
- Orroroo SCL
- Port Pirie
- Yorketown SCL
- Kadina
- Mount Gambier
- Pinnaroo SCL (remote-only)
- Lucindale SCL (remote-only)
- Meningie SCL (remote-only)
- Port Lincoln (remote-only)
- Port Augusta (remote-only)

- Whyalla (remote-only)
- Renmark-Paringa (remote-only)
- Cummins SCL (remote-only)

In addition to these regional interviews, there were multiple consultations with Port Adelaide Enfield library, which informed the report's discussion on the role and value of device-lending programs.

Consultations with regional community centre staff

Interviews were held – in some cases, multiple consultations – with 15 staff or volunteers from 12 community centres:

- Peterborough Community Hub
- Southern Yorke Peninsula Community Hub
- Maitland Information Centre
- Mount Gambier Community Centre
- Millicent Community Centre (remote-only)
- Roxby Downs Community Centre (remote-only)
- Port Pirie Community Centre (remote-only)
- Kangaroo Island Community Centre (remote-only)
- Whyalla Community Centre (remote-only)
- Strathalbyn Neighbourhood Centre (remote-only)
- Port Germein Community Hub (remote-only)
- Tailem Bend Community Centre (remote-only)

Consultations with other local, regional, and digital inclusion stakeholders

Over the course of this project, meetings and consultations were also held with the following organisations:

- Copper Coast Uni Hub
- Red Cross Port Pirie
- Regional Development Australia Mid-North (remote-only)
- Maxima Employment
- Status Employment
- Wise Employment
- The Smith Family
- St. Vincent de Paul Society SA
- The Good Things Foundation
- SAFCA (South Australian Financial Counsellors Association)
- NEAMI
- LEGATUS group of Councils (remote-only)
- SHLGA (Southern Hills Local Government Association)
- COTA (Council for Ageing) SA
- COTA Yorke Peninsula Advisory Group (remote-only)

- AC Care (Mount Gambier, Murray Bridge)
- Uniting Country SA (Port Pirie, Kadina, Peterborough)
- Peterborough Rural Transaction Centre
- Yorketown Young Mothers' Group
- Karoonda Men's Shed
- Edithburgh Leisure Options Group
- Country Home Services
- Pangula Mannamurna
- University of the Third Age Maitland
- Catholic Care Country SA (remote-only)
- Red Cross Mount Gambier (remote-only)
- Australian Migrant Resource Centre (remote-only)

Summaries of findings, and draft recommendations, were presented at Council meetings for the following local governments areas:

- Karoonda East Murray
- Peterborough
- Yorke Peninsula
- Mount Gambier

Appendix 3: Reference Group

The following is a list of members of the Reference Group, a mix of libraries and community centres representatives, local stakeholders, regional advocates, and digital inclusion experts, who provided guidance and feedback throughout the project:

- Veronica Matthews, Public Library Services
- Brendan Robinson, Public Library Services
- Jo Cooper, Public Library Services
- Julian Smith, Public Library Services
- Jacqui D'Sylva, Community Centres SA
- Kerrie Akkermans, Community Centres SA
- Sue Muster, Karoonda School-Community Library
- Chris Malycha, Peterborough School and Community Library
- Kate Martin, Southern Yorke Peninsula Community Hub
- Carina Congdon, Yorke Peninsula Council
- Georgina Davison, Mount Gambier Library
- Pankaj Chhalotre, Infoxchange/Connecting Up
- Catherine McIntyre, Infoxchange/Connecting Up
- Lyndsey Jackson, regional digital inclusion advocate

H: Extended References List

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Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance, *A National Digital Inclusion Roadmap*, 2020.

AuDA, *Digital Lives of Australians*, 2022.

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