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Digital Inclusion

Background

Digital inclusion is a new frontier of poverty. It is about more than simply owning a computer or smartphone. It is about using online and digital technologies to access employment, education, training, commerce and government services; and to enhance quality of life. Yet not everyone is able to make full use of digital technologies – there is a digital divide which threatens to exclude those not digitally connected. This divide reflects and compounds other areas of socio-economic disadvantage, and as more people, government and business services and more cultural interactions go online, the divide gets deeper.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index¹ measures the personal use of digital technologies with scores reported in relation to access, ability and affordability. Alarming South Australia consistently rates below the national average and is the second worst performing state or territory in Australia (only ahead of Tasmania). While digital inclusion is increasing, the fact that South Australia is still below the rest of the country has implications for our community and our future economic performance.

The importance of digital inclusion was also seen throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The constant appeals from authorities to “check the information on the SA Health website” and the use of public health tools such as QR codes were limited or made more difficult by lack of digital access and literacy. The ability to work from home presupposed the requisite skills and equipment, and this was particularly evident as parents and schools scrambled to enable schooling at home. While South Australia was fortunate to avoid long school closures, some students still struggled and the reality is that modern children need digital access outside of school as a normal – not just in response to a pandemic.

In this context, SACOSS’ research on waged poverty² has noted the ACT Government’s program providing free Chromebooks to all public secondary school students and recommended that where they are not already available, state governments should provide basic computer equipment for all school students. That report also highlights the importance of free public wifi to people on very low incomes, as well as how crucial digital technology is for a range of jobs – including jobs not traditionally seen as part of the digital economy like retail, nursing, delivery, and social work.

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

² SACOSS (2020), [Connectivity Costs II: Telecommunications Affordability and Waged Poor Households](#), Adelaide.

Policy Response

For many years SACOSS has been arguing that a statewide digital inclusion plan is required to ensure that all South Australians can access and enjoy the digital future. While this has not happened, the SA government's last budget included a \$120m investment in a Digital Restart Fund to improve government ICT and the public's digital service access. This is a significant investment in government's digital capacity, but it is limited in scope in being largely internal to government. It does not ensure that citizens have the access and skills to use the technologies to take advantage of the improved government platforms.

Further, while the Digital Restart Fund is welcome, the investment is only a small fraction of the size of a similar package in the NSW state budget, which was \$1.6bn over 3 years.³ If South Australia invested the same, pro rata, our Digital Restart Fund would have been \$344m (or \$505m if proportionate to total government expenditure). More than half of the first year's allocation in NSW is going to close the digital gap in regional and remote schools, while in Victoria the new \$626m Digital Future Now package includes a \$64m program to enable 5,000 unemployed people to undertake digital skills training or a digital internship.⁴

These are clear examples of government digital investment not simply improving ICT, but improving digital inclusion in the community. Without increased expenditure from the South Australian government, our state will continue to lag (or fall further behind) digital inclusion levels elsewhere in the country.

SACOSS Proposal

SACOSS is proposing an additional investment of \$120m in initiatives to improve digital inclusion. This would double the existing Digital Restart Fund and bring us closer to the NSW investment. More crucially, it would allow for the fund to be expanded to include key issues of public access and digital inclusion, including:

- Free laptops/notebooks for all secondary school children (modelled on the ACT program)
- Expansion of the public wifi network – potentially based on expanded school networks, plus funding for Community Centres to provide free wifi
- Increased investment in digital inclusion skills, including digital employment skills.
- A grant fund for community initiatives that boost digital inclusion in South Australia.

The rationale for these particular expenditures is set out in SACOSS' *Connectivity Cost* report and previous SACOSS Budget Submissions, while the last is a broader version of the \$24m unallocated in the current Digital Restart Fund.

³ NSW Government, [Digital Restart Fund](#), website accessed 3 February 2020.

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