Briefing Note

SACOSS
South Australian Council of Social Service

COVID-19 and Digital Inclusion in South Australian

Background

Digital inclusion refers to the ability of all people to access and use online technology. It encompasses not just physical access to wires, waves and devices, but also the ability to afford that access and the digital literacy to be able to use the technology.

With South Australia consistently lagging near the bottom of the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (see Appendix), SACOSS has long recognised the importance of digital inclusion to the economic prosperity of South Australia. Our 2017-18 Budget Submission noted:

> There is little doubt that the jobs of tomorrow will be in the digital economy, if not directly in digital communications, then at least in industries and occupations that require the use of digital technologies. It will be vital that everyone has the access and ability to participate in this digital economy and in the digital world more broadly.

The government has recognised the importance of digital technology for the state's future with the SA Infrastructure Strategy prioritising the need for digital connectivity. However, the Strategy deals mainly with physical connectivity, rather than the issues of affordability and literacy which also form a crucial part of the digital divide.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis exposed critical problems arising out of our existing digital divide as the lack of digital connection of many South Australian households limited opportunities to work (and learn) from home when social distancing and isolation policies meant travel and attendance at workplaces was not advisable.

Schools, colleges and universities were scrambling to put courses online, but students were not always equipped to access this material. As one educator noted, many families at her school could barely afford books, let alone a laptop or decent home internet, and it was not uncommon for four students to be sharing one laptop at home. SACOSS's forthcoming research on telecommunications affordability shows the importance of the ACT government's provision of Chromebooks for all public school students above year 7 (both of itself, and in response to the COVID-19 shutdowns). In the absence of such programs in South Australia parents were sometimes faced with an impossible choice of either sending children to school amid safety concerns (when many other children were not there), or seeing their children miss out on education.

Similarly, (as SACOSS knows from our own workplace) people's work choices have been constrained by their level of digital connection – despite the government advise to work from home where possible.

Government policy was also limited by digital exclusion in the critical area of health. While the COVID-19 crisis fast-tracked the introduction and use of telehealth, this welcome measure is not available to those without appropriate digital connection. And perhaps even more crucially, when the government was calling for people to download the COVID-safe app to assist in contact tracing, the impact was limited because by definition those without smart phones can't use the app. Given that the Australian Digital Inclusion Index data shows that older Australians are less likely to be digitally included, this means that a cohort of those who are likely to be most vulnerable to COVID-19 are not going to be included in the accidental/anonymous contact tracing the app was designed to provide. This is a poor outcome both for those vulnerable people and for public health policy across the state.

SACOSS recognises the enormous efforts made by government, schools, businesses and non-government organisations when the coronavirus hit to enable digital connection. However, the short-term responses inevitably left gaps and we should not have been in the position to need to scramble in the first place. Digital inclusion is not something that can be addressed in quick response and the COVID-19 crisis simply highlighted the importance of the digital fault lines in South Australia. We need to address these fault lines both to address the public health issues highlighted by coronavirus, but also to ensure the inclusiveness of future economic growth and prosperity – and to do this, we need a plan to ensure that no South Australians are left behind in a digital world.

SACOSS recommends that the Digital Connectivity Strategy envisaged in the SA Infrastructure Strategy include a digital inclusion plan, or alternatively that a separate state digital inclusion plan be developed.

Appendix: South Australian Data from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index

Source: Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, 2019, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019*, RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra.

South Australia: Geographic Breakdown

2019	Australia	SA	Adelaide	Rural SA	North	West	East	South	Yorke & Murray	Eyre*	South East SA*
ACCESS											
Internet Access	87.9	87.8	88.9	84.1	86.4	89.5	92.3	88.8	84.0	83.9	84.8
Internet Technology	80.4	80.6	81.2	78.5	80.5	78.8	82.1	83.1	78.2	79.6	77.7
Internet Data Allowance	58.7	56.9	58.0	53.0	57.8	58.6	58.5	57.2	52.8	56.6	47.6
	75.7	**75.1**	**76.0**	**71.9**	**74.9**	**75.6**	**77.6**	**76.4**	**71.7**	**73.4**	**70.0**
AFFORDABILITY											
Relative Expenditure	54.6	52.5	54.6	45.2	52.7	61.0	54.3	52.9	45.9	40.9	50.4
Value of Expenditure	63.9	61.7	63.1	56.7	63.4	65.9	62.5	61.3	56.9	58.8	52.5
	59.2	**57.1**	**58.8**	**50.9**	**58.0**	**63.5**	**58.4**	**57.1**	**51.4**	**49.9**	**51.5**
DIGITAL ABILITY											
Attitudes	51.2	48.7	49.6	45.5	45.0	54.1	52.4	50.0	45.4	46.6	43.5
Basic Skills	58.1	56.6	59.0	48.6	56.1	62.1	63.9	56.4	47.5	54.9	41.1
Activities	43.1	40.3	42.3	33.3	38.3	46.9	45.5	41.6	33.1	36.1	28.8
	50.8	**48.5**	**50.3**	**42.4**	**46.5**	**54.3**	**53.9**	**49.3**	**42.0**	**45.9**	**37.8**
DIGITAL INCLUSION INDEX	**61.9**	**60.2**	**61.7**	**55.1**	**59.8**	**64.5**	**63.3**	**60.9**	**55.0**	**56.4**	**53.1**