



Tasmanian Council of Social Service Inc.

Submission to the discussion paper on the Digital Economy: opening up the conversation *November 2017*



**INTEGRITY
COMPASSION
INFLUENCE**

About TasCOSS

TasCOSS is the peak body for the community services sector in Tasmania. Our membership includes individuals and organisations active in the provision of community services to low income, vulnerable and disadvantaged Tasmanians. TasCOSS represents the interests of its members and their clients to government, regulators, the media and the public. Through our advocacy and policy development, we draw attention to the causes of poverty and disadvantage, and promote the adoption of effective solutions to address these issues.

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Introduction

Access to digital services is increasingly becoming as essential for daily life as other services such as electricity and water. Education, work opportunities, government services and social connections are all increasingly accessed through digital technologies. At the same time there is an increasing digital divide, not everyone has the same access. As the peak body for the Tasmanian community services sector and advocate for the low-income, disadvantaged and vulnerable Tasmanians that the sector supports, TasCOSS has a keen interest in digital inclusion, the benefits it can deliver and ways that digital inclusion can reduce disadvantage. TasCOSS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the discussion paper *The Digital Economy: Opening up the Conversation*.

Our response provides a brief overview of digital inclusion in Tasmania, then we address selected questions from the discussion paper.

Digital inclusion in Tasmania

Digital inclusion is about social and economic participation: using online and mobile technologies to improve skills, enhance quality of life, educate, and promote wellbeing across the whole of society. Digitally skilled and engaged communities support the Australian economy by providing valuable workers, customers and entrepreneurs. The whole community benefits from improved digital inclusion.

The latest Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) report shows that Tasmania remains Australia's least digitally included state.¹ The ADII data show that the gap between Tasmania and other jurisdictions is increasing. Without remedial action, Tasmania will be left further behind.

Some groups in Tasmania experience particularly high levels of digital exclusion, shown by ADII scores substantially below the state average (49.7). These are people in low income households (40.5), older Australians (41.0), people who did not complete secondary school (42.7), and people not in paid employment (45.8).

While the ADII is not the only, nor necessarily the most important indicator of community well-being, it reinforces what is already well-known –the benefits of new technologies are not shared equally, and people living in poverty can have their disadvantage further entrenched by digital exclusion.

A SACOSS 2016 report into connectivity costs shows that 62% of the (low income) respondents surveyed reported experiencing either difficulty paying for, or having to cut back or stop using one or more telecommunications services for financial reasons in the last 12 months.² In the same year, the Salvation

¹ Australian Digital Inclusion Index, 2007 Report. Available at <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Australian-Digital-Inclusion-Index-Report-2017.docx>

Tasmania's index score is 6.8 points below the national average (49.7 compared with 56.5). The second lowest state is South Australia on 53.9, 2.6 points below the national average.

² Ogle, G. & Musolino, V. 2016, Connectivity Costs: Telecommunications Affordability for Low Income Australians, Australian

Army's *Out of Reach* report demonstrated that 58% of surveyed households with children could not afford an internet connection at home and 74% did not have a computer, table or iPad.³ While it may be assumed that young people are 'digital natives', these data show that some children and young people lack adequate access to the internet and digital technology platforms. There is clearly a risk that over time, this initial disadvantage will be amplified in education and the labour market.

The potential benefits of digital inclusion and risks of exclusion related to poverty are particularly significant in Tasmania, because 31.3% of Tasmania's population are in the most disadvantaged socioeconomic status quintile (one-fifth) of Australia's population, a higher proportion than for any other State or Territory.⁴ A whole of community approach to digital inclusion will enable Tasmania to derive much needed benefit from the digital economy.

Question 2 What is your vision for an Australia that thrives in a digital economy? Where would you like to see Australia in five, 10 and 20 years time?

The TasCOSS vision is for **One Tasmania, free of poverty and inequality where everyone has the same opportunity**. Our vision for a thriving digital Australia is similar – an Australia, free of poverty and inequality, where everyone has the same opportunity to participate in the use of online and mobile technologies to improve skills, enhance quality of life, educate, and promote wellbeing across the whole of society. Action from local, State and Federal governments is required so that all citizens have opportunities to share in the benefits of the emerging digital economy.

In five years, we would hope to see a substantially reduced gap between those who are digitally included and those who are currently left behind. With well-resourced measures in place, and clear evaluation and accountability mechanisms to ensure targets are met, greater equality between states, between demographic groups, and between regions and communities could be achieved in five years. As the discussion paper notes: "Community education and digital literacy is key."⁵ In particular, securing connectedness for all young people needs to be a priority.

In 10 years, we would like to see digital inclusion as business as usual. No-one is missing out, the catchup work between and within jurisdictions has been completed and services are designed to reach people where they are as a matter of routine. Government, community [and business] services use digital delivery to ensure a better experience for people who use services, with non-digital traditional assistance available for people who need it. In all areas of government, data would be collected and

Communications Consumer Action Network, Sydney.

https://www.sacoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/documents/Reports/161103_Connectivity%20Costs_accessible-web.pdf
Accessed 16 October 2017

³ The Salvation Army 2016 *Out of Reach*, national economic and social impact survey p46.

⁴ Eslake, S. *Education, Productivity and Economic Performance: Tasmania Then, Now and Tomorrow* Address to the Launceston Historical Society, 16 March 2017, p 9.

⁵ The Digital Economy: Opening up the conversation, p9.

analysed to provide a strong evidence-base that advocates, researchers and decision-makers are able to access for policy development. Privacy and security protections would be integrated, and people's rights over their own information would be upheld.

In 20 years, we would like to see all citizens well placed and equally placed to engage with the benefits of digital technologies, regardless of income, demographic status, location and state.

Question 20 What opportunities do we have to equip Australians with the skills they need for the digital economy of today's jobs and the jobs of the future?

There are opportunities for partnerships and for leveraging existing relationships of trust to reach people who are currently not engaged digitally. Initial basic digital skills are often learned informally, from other people, who are trusted and competent. The community sector has a combination of workers and volunteers that reach into almost every community across Australia, and who are broadly trusted. As a not-for-profit sector, the sector has limited resources to invest in technology and training, beyond the basic requirements for reporting and the like. However, there are opportunities to build capacity in ways that will benefit individuals and organisations, and that additional capacity can be shared with other members of the community, both formally and informally. With appropriate upskilling within the sector and appropriate resourcing, members of the community sector could build and maintain a critical mass of digital capability ready to share broadly with people otherwise excluded or vulnerable to exclusion. There are opportunities for engaging with schools, libraries and other services to reach out to communities, groups and individuals to enhance digital capability.

Question 21 what opportunities do we have to bridge the 'digital divide' and make the most of the benefits that digital technologies present for social inclusion?

To bridge the 'digital divide', it is essential to ensure all people are included. One possible model is the Australian Electoral Commission, which is obliged to reach all eligible voters, to ensure no-one is left out. A comparable commitment to a 'digital citizenship' model would help to bridge the digital divide by ensuring that the hardest to reach were included and supported.

Since lack of digital literacy and skills is a major barrier to accessing and maintaining employment, measures that bring people into the digital community will likely have positive effects for individuals and for the economy. With digital skills, people can be better able to find and succeed at work, without these skills, they will remain excluded and marginalized. The community sector could provide opportunities for partnerships, trials and new initiatives to improve digital inclusion, especially for the initial steps which many people find daunting.

Question 22 What opportunities do we have to ensure digital technology has a positive impact on the cultural practices and social relationships of Australians?

A model of empowerment and consultation with end-users is important. To have a positive impact on cultural practices and social relationships, technology needs to meet people where they are, and deliver what they find valuable. This is not the case at present, for example, many people are obliged to use technology to access government services, with interfaces that are not welcoming or easy to use. A positive impact would mean that technology delivered better services for users. People who are empowered to use technology to connect with the services they need or want to use will be able to say what digital technologies can deliver. Given that the answer to the question of ensuring a positive impact will change alongside digital transformation, a strong enduring program of consumer-led design or co-design is critical.

Good policy is needed to ensure that systems and services support the cultural practices and social relationships of Australians. An integrated approach to data is critical to support the development and implementation of good policy. Transparency across government departments and levels of government, and between government and other sectors will enable comparisons and multiple uses of data. Accurate and timely data will support responsive programs that can be adjusted to improve delivery of outcomes, and to inform good policy development. Effective learning from initiatives across regions and sectors can be maximised with good collection and use of data.

Conclusion

For many people, digital technology supports social engagement, education, work and work seeking, and access to all kinds of information. For others, access to job advertisements, housing options, education is severely limited, as they lack the skills, connectivity or financial means to engage on digital platforms. This impoverishment aligns with and amplifies other forms of social exclusion, such as financial poverty and low educational attainment. Many people who face digital exclusion face other challenges too, and the remedies are intersectional and complex. However, the more Australia can achieve a socially inclusive digital transformation, the stronger our digital economy will be.

For Australia to maximise the opportunities made available by the digital economy, policies will need to ensure that all citizens are well placed and equally placed to engage with the benefits of digital technologies, regardless of income, demographic status, location and state. Patterns of digital exclusion currently leave groups such as low income households, older Australians, people with disabilities, people with low educational attainment and people not in paid employment, at risk of being left further behind. Improving capability and affordability for these groups is urgently needed if the real potential of the digital economy – making life better for all Australians – is to be realised.