Good Things Foundation
Australia

Submission &
Recommendations

Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

Good Things Foundation Australia Submission
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Good Things
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Introduction

The COVID-19 lockdown restrictions across Australia and worldwide have reduced our ability to stay connected like we used to, increasing social isolation, and highlighting digital inclusion as an issue for all states and territories. As everything has had to move online, vulnerable Australians are being left behind not only in their ability to access information, services, and contribute to Australia's digital economy, but more importantly in their ability to stay connected to others.

This submission will focus on the need for people to have the digital skills and confidence to find reliable information online and connect with friends, family and community to both address and prevent social isolation and loneliness.

Good Things Foundation Australia believes that building digitally resilient communities will assist in creating more connected communities, and Governments can work with community organisations and telecommunications service providers on solutions.

Good Things Foundation Australia thanks the Queensland Community Support and Services Committee for the opportunity to make this submission, following the numerous COVID-19 lockdowns resulting in increased social isolation and loneliness.

Digital exclusion in Queensland

2.5 million Australians are not online[1] and less than 40% of people are confident that they can keep up with rapid changes in technology.[2] The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) shows that while rates of digital inclusion have been slowly improving over time, there remains a substantial digital divide in Australia.[3] This divide is creating a separation between those who can and cannot fully and safely participate in the digital world, and therefore connect with others during COVID-19 lockdowns.

The ADII score ranks Queensland fifth out of Australia's eight states and territories,[4] and shows a high gap in digital inclusion between metro and rural areas.[5] Though some digital advancement has been made to adjust for the digital world over pandemic lockdowns, it has also exposed digital inequalities which must be addressed to ensure the equal reopening of Queensland post-pandemic.

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[1]Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, (2020), *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra, p. 15

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 12

[4] Ibid., p. 32

[5] Ibid., p. 33

The gap between digitally included and excluded Queenslanders is substantial and widening for some groups.[6] Those more likely to experience digital exclusion are:

- People with a mobile-only connection
- People on low incomes
- People with low levels of education
- People aged over 65 years
- People with disabilities
- People who are not in the labour force
- First Nations peoples
- People living in rural and remote areas of Australia
- Women[7]
- New culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) migrants and refugees[8]

Three main factors influence a person's ability to cross the digital divide: ability, affordability, and access.[9] Often, these factors interplay with each other to influence levels of inclusion. Without an affordable and reliable internet connection, there is reduced access to information, digital services, and communication channels with one's community, family, individuals, and government.[10] There are also reduced opportunities to develop key skills. Even after Australians are connected to and using the internet on an appropriate device, many people still don't feel confident or safe online or feel they can't keep up with the rapid pace of technological change.[11] Higher levels of inclusion in all three areas are required to lead people and communities to be 100% digitally included.

COVID-19 and the consequent lockdowns and restrictions saw Australians increasingly turn to the internet for everyday services, socialisation, work, and education. People who are digitally excluded risk being left behind across a number of these areas, while those who are digitally included can more readily benefit from Australia's rapid transition to online information, services and communication.

Especially in the rural and remote landscape of Queensland, there have been difficulties in internet infrastructure and affordability, as well as digital attitudes and capacity.[12] It is

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[6] Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, (2020), _Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020_, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra, p. 32

[7] Ibid., p. 6

[8] Settlement Council of Australia & Good Things Foundation Australia (2021) _Supporting the Digital Inclusion of New Migrants and Refugees_, p. 6

[9] Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, (2020), _Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020_, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra, p. 5

[10] ABS (2016), Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2014-15, https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/8146.0Main+Features12014-15?OpenDocument= accessed on 11 January 2021

[11] Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, (2020), _Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020_, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra, p. 15

[12] Marshall, A., Dale, A., Babacan, H. & Dezuanni, M. 2019. Connectivity and digital inclusion in Far North Queensland's agricultural communities. A Cairns Institute Policy Focused Report , James Cook University, Cairns.

incredibly important for people to have access and ability in these areas, which are more prone to emergency situations and isolation.

- Read about Ken's journey to digital in rural Queensland

Social isolation, loneliness and the digital divide

Loneliness has been described as "one of the most pressing public health issues of our time",[13] with COVID-19 restrictions elevating the risk of social isolation.[14] Between March and April in 2020, one in two Australians reported feeling lonelier since the COVID-19 pandemic began.[15]

The pandemic has particularly highlighted the digital divide in Australia. With social distancing policies enacted across the country, the restrictions showed more than ever the need for people to have basic digital skills and affordable access to technology. Before the pandemic, many Australians relied on the internet for some important activities in their lives, such as online banking, work emails, online education and entertainment. But, in a very short period of time, a more extensive range of activities have had to move online, from ordering essentials to online remote working, learning and medical consultations, as well as keeping socially connected to friends and family.

There is a particular risk of social isolation surrounding older Australians due to a lack of affordable internet access and digital ability, with one in five older Australians not using the internet at all at the start of the pandemic.[16] This is further aggravated by the fact that older Australians are more likely to live alone[17] and, because of the COVID-19 restrictions and fear of transmission, have been particularly encouraged to reduce their face-to-face socialisation[18].

New migrants and refugees have also experienced access, affordability and ability barriers to digital inclusion, alongside huge language barriers. Many have missed out on information, leading them to limited education and services, further increasing social exclusion and isolation for these groups.[19]

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[13] Ending Loneliness Together (2020) *Ending Loneliness Together in Australia White Paper*, p. 6

[14] Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, (2020), *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra, p. 22

[15] Ending Loneliness Together (2020) *Ending Loneliness Together in Australia White Paper*, p. 6

[16] Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, (2020), *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra, p. 23

[17] ABS (2016), Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2014-15, https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/8146.0Main+Features12014-15?OpenDocument= accessed on 11 January 2021

[18] Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, (2020), *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra, p. 23

[19] Settlement Council of Australia & Good Things Foundation Australia (2021) *Supporting the Digital Inclusion of New Migrants and Refugees*, p. 15

During the pandemic, over a third of Australians increased their use of social networking sites[20] and three-quarters of adult Australian internet users in 2020 used communication apps to make voice and video calls or send messages[21], showing how digital technology brought us together during times of social restrictions. This included older Australians, who increased their use of digital technology to connect with others, though at much lower levels than younger populations.[22]

Therefore, while Australians display some distrust around internet use due to safety concerns, the pressures of isolation and social distancing measures have nonetheless seen an increase in internet use for social purposes.

However, in this quickly changing digitisation of socialisation, work and health, there are many people left behind - especially those already vulnerable to social exclusion.[23] People need to have the digital skills and confidence to find reliable information online in an emergency, contact friends and family, and connect with their community and essential recovery and support services.

Current digital inclusion initiatives

Good Things Foundation is an international leader in supporting digital inclusion. Core to our model is a network of hyper-local community organisations alongside high-quality online learning materials. In Australia, we have built and support the Be Connected Network of 3,500 community organisations delivering in-person digital skills programs to people in their community. In Queensland, we have 654 organisations involved, 55% of which are located in regional/remote communities. Organisations in our Network are diverse and include community centres, libraries, local Councils, Men's Sheds, aged care and retirement villages, multicultural seniors groups, and disability and employment services. Some of the organisations in our Queensland Network include State Library of Queensland, Bloomhill Cancer Care, and WorkWays.

Be Connected is an Australian Government initiative supporting and enabling older Australians to develop digital skills and confidence online. To date, the program has supported 1 million Australians to gain basic digital skills and seen 15,000 people become Digital Mentors, who are able to further support their communities to gain confidence online. This program is a blended learning approach - using digital tools and in-person support to motivate and encourage people to improve their digital capability. The digital mentors delivering the support and the community organisations in the Network are trusted members of the community, and a big reason as to why this program approach works.

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[20] ACMA (2021) _Communications and Media in Australia. How we communicate,_ p. 7

[21] Ibid., p. 3

[22] ACMA (2021) _Communications and Media in Australia. The Digital Lives of Older Australians,_ p. 5

[23] Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, (2020), _Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020,_ RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra, p. 6

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- ● [Read the Be Connected Evaluation](#)
- ● [Watch our case study of WorkWays in Charters Towers](#)
- ● [Watch our case study of Ravenshoe Community Centre](#)

An evaluation of the program showed a reduction in loneliness for participants, and overall showed a positive social return on investment, with $4.01 created for every $1 invested.[24] The program has scope to benefit all Australians to gain basic digital skills, including people with disabilities, people on low income, low education, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.[25]

The evaluation assessed Be Connected learners' social connection through the University of California Los Angeles Loneliness Scale, which showed that over the course of their attendance at Be Connected loneliness was significantly reduced.[26] This could be due to learners gaining more digital skills to communicate with their friends and family online, or through the very important social aspect of the program's structure which helped learners feel more socially connected. Either way, the program has been shown to successfully reduce loneliness in older Australians and increase social connection.

Community organisations in the Network often have roles greater than digital skills provision in the recovery and support effort, such as social or health support. Some organisations in the Network, such as libraries and community centres, can be the place where community members access digital devices and the internet if they do not have this access at home. Last year, 75% of surveyed Network Partners had learners who did not have digital devices at home they could use. If people are cut off from this access due to lockdown restrictions, digital access levels in the community will decline from usual levels.

Many organisations attempted to continue helping people during the pandemic, through distanced support, phone help, or online sessions. The Be Connected program has also been able to offer over $1 million in funding for organisations to buy and lend out devices and data to people in their communities that would otherwise not have access to a device or the internet. This grant has so far supported 359 organisations to supply 2,300 loan devices and data to digitally excluded older Australians.

Delivered in partnership with the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, Be Connected consists of a range of resources and activities to help people learn basic digital skills. One of the most popular topics is '*Connecting to others*', including courses on how to use video calling, communication apps and even Zoom.

Health My Way is another successful digital literacy program managed by Good Things Foundation Australia. This smaller program worked alongside 75 Network Partners, 13 of

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[24] McCosker, A., Tucker, J., Critchley, C., Hiruy, K., Walshe, J., Suchowerska, R., Barraket, J. (2020) *Improving the digital inclusion of older Australians: The social impact of Be Connected*. Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, p. 9
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., p. 39

which were in Queensland. Nationally, we trained 232 digital mentors to support over 3,000 learners develop basic digital health skills. This program is open to Australians over the age of 18, and 79% of participating organisations noted that the program increased participants' access to digital health literacy support, and 92% said the program increased participants' social interactions and connections.

- [Read more about the social impact of Health My Way](#)

Get Online Week is an annual digital inclusion campaign run by Good Things Foundation every October. Last year over 700 community organisations in Australia took part by hosting events to give people the chance to find the support they need to improve their digital skills. In response to the pandemic, for the first time community organisations could choose to hold their Get Online Week events either online or as COVID-Safe in-person events, depending on the public gathering restrictions and health advice in their location. Over 1,600 events took place during Get Online Week last year, with over 23,500 people supported at these events. 89% of event holders reported the campaign helped their community to socially connect, and 99.7% said Get Online Week was beneficial to their community.

- [Read more about Get Online Week 2020](#)

Another very successful digital inclusion program in Queensland is Deadly Digital Communities, run by the State Library of Queensland and Telstra in partnership with local Indigenous Knowledge Centres and public library services. The program has been shown to meet the communities needs, supporting over 4,600 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders since 2017 to gain digital skills, as well as share intergenerational connections and culture. This approach has proven effective and should be considered for future programs.

Gaps in Queensland's digital social inclusion

Dedicated funding, programs, and learning resources need to be developed to support existing, trusted digital mentors at community organisations. These resources need to support communities to be digitally skilled in:

- Access - Staying connected to the internet and information and communication services

- Capability - How to use the relevant apps and websites, how to find reliable information and identify misinformation online, connecting with family, friends, community and information services, and accessing services online (e.g. Government funding, mental health services)

- Resilience - Being able to digitally adapt and respond to changing situations and technological solutions as they happen.

Queensland Council of Social Service is currently conducting research on the digital divide specifically in Queensland, and this will help to further inform initiatives for digital inclusion.

Good Things Foundation Australia is also about to launch a pilot program in Queensland with Down Syndrome Australia, supporting young people with intellectual disabilities and their families/carers to learn essential digital skills.

Governments at the Federal, State and Local levels need to work cooperatively with community digital skills service providers and telecommunications infrastructure and services providers to ensure digitally excluded communities have the support and resources they need to be more digitally resilient and prepared for future lockdowns. Such actions need to be taken before the digitalisation of government services and support, and in preparation of social distancing restrictions.

Recommendations

Improving digital inclusion will help to address and prevent social isolation and loneliness through these challenging and changing times and beyond.

To support Queensland communities to become more socially connected and digitally resilient for the future, Good Things Foundation Australia recommends:

1. **Ensure everyone in Queensland has access to essential digital skills support, so the community is better prepared to stay connected during emergencies or lockdown restrictions.**

2. **Provide funding for community-based essential digital skills programs to improve the capacity of Queenslanders to digitally prepare for and remain socially connected despite social distancing.** Particular focus needs to be given to supporting groups more likely to experience digital exclusion.

3. **Support existing community education programs so all Queenslanders have the skills to stay connected and manage health and wellbeing.**

4. **Ensure everyone in Queensland has access to an affordable digital device and internet connection at home, so they can fully participate in the digital world.**

About Good Things Foundation Australia

Good Things Foundation Australia is a social change charity, helping people to improve their lives through digital. We work with partners in thousands of communities across Australia and the UK.

In Australia, we have built and manage the Australian Government funded Be Connected Network of 3,500 community partners and deliver a small grants program to support people over 50 to learn essential digital skills. We coordinate the annual digital inclusion campaign Get Online Week, which last year supported 23,500 people to get more out of life online. With the support of the Australian Digital Health Agency and our network of community organisations, we are assisting adults of all ages to improve their digital health literacy through our Health My Way program.

Good Things Foundation has run digital inclusion projects in the UK for over ten years and worked in Australia since 2017.

Learn more about our work:
- Good Things Foundation Australia website: www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au
- Information about our projects
- Our research and publications
- Our work in the UK

Contact

Please do not hesitate to contact us should you require further information on the above recommendations.

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