PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2025-26

Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance
31 January, 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite advancements, and significant economic and social benefits on offer, nearly 24% of Australians remain digitally excluded, with stark divides along geographic, socio-economic, and demographic lines. Key barriers include affordability, access, and ability—core pillars essential for equitable digital participation.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) highlights persistent gaps, particularly for First Nations communities, older Australians, people with disability and individuals in low-income households. Challenges remain for improvement across all three inclusion pillars, while ability - as the lowest scoring pillar - presents a particular opportunity for focussed attention.

Meanwhile, emerging technologies like AI and increasing digital service reliance further compound disparities and highlight the need for consistent and coordinated action, including a standardised approach to enhance generalist entry-level digital skills and literacy.

Digital exclusion exacerbates broader social inequities, impacting education, employment, and access to essential services like telehealth, government services and banking. Conversely, enhancing digital inclusion offers significant benefits, with conservative estimates projecting $467 million in annual economic contributions from improved digital participation of highly excluded groups.

Recognising the complex multifactor nature of digital exclusion and the positive contribution of a broad ecosystem of business, government, academic and community organisations, the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission process.

As such, we are pleased to provide the following position paper, outlining key issues, insights and themes, as well as making key recommendations underpinned by a call for government to elevate its focus on digital inclusion through a purposeful coordinating role that alleviates fragmentation across initiatives and results in a cohesive national strategy to address digital exclusion as a priority.

RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

The Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance recommends:

- Government collaborate with ADIA and key digital inclusion stakeholders to develop a National Digital Inclusion Strategy, including the establishment of a key government responsibility to coordinate and prioritise digital inclusion programs and their delivery through the digital inclusion ecosystem.
- Investment in digital inclusion is required across all policy and program areas, from education to infrastructure, from community and social services to everyday civic and societal participation. Departments should be required to consider digital inclusion aspects of policy and program decisions, including opportunities to address digital exclusion.
- Investment in stronger mapping of the digital ability aspects of digital inclusion, including a linkage with digital and media literacy with respect to the emerging challenges of AI.
- Government collaborate with ADIA and key digital inclusion stakeholders for the implementation of DigComp as a national common language to describe digital ability, including a definition of digital literacy, research into digital ability across the community and embedding digital capabilities into the National Skills Taxonomy.
- Support not-for-profits in their technology capability and capacity to deliver digital inclusion initiatives in the community.
- Develop a concessional broadband product, addressing the affordable internet needs of low-income households.
- Support implementation of an independent internet plan comparison tool, allowing consumers to identify market offers that best met their needs.
- Implement a national device bank.
- Expand small cell mobile and community Wi-Fi networks to more in underserved communities.
- Prioritise the recommendations of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group as a way to both address Outcome 17 of the Closing the Gap framework in overcoming the inequality experienced by First Nations Australians while contributing to our broader national digital inclusion challenge.
- Provide ongoing government support for the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group to continue to provide First Nations leadership to address Closing the Gap Outcome 17, as well as the data collection to measure progress on Target 17.

INTRODUCTION

In 2025, 30 years since Australians were first introduced to internet services, there remain few aspects of daily life that don't involve some form of digital engagement. From essential government services, day-to-day commerce and financial management, education, work, news and media information, entertainment, communication, community engagement and so much more, the infrastructure that supports our effective participation in society is inherently digital in nature.

Inclusivity has been an aspiration for Australia's social contract for decades. It has informed policy across a spectrum of government responsibility and while disadvantage persists, the best initiatives and programs are coordinated to improve outcomes based on experience, foresight and understanding the challenges faced by those at the fringes.

By their nature governments are required to make choices about maximising impact from limited resources. It is notable that the adoption of digital technology is often considered in this regard, targeting resources to create efficiencies and enhance access for the many. Meanwhile, the implementation of these same innovations by government and across the economy has resulted in a cohort of disadvantaged, who lack the tools, the financial means and/or the skills to engage in this evolving world. Meanwhile, that same exclusion serves to exacerbate other underlying factors of disadvantage.

Since 2015, the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) has provided a detailed measure of digital inclusion, highlighting critical barriers to how Australians can benefit from digital technologies. While its most recent survey in 2023 highlighted continued improvement in Australia's overall rate of digital inclusion, it found that almost 24% of Australians remain either 'excluded' or 'highly excluded', with a continuing divide between capital cities and the rest of the country, and a pronounced gap between First Nations and non-First Nations people[1].

The Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA) is a shared initiative with over 500 business, government, academic and community organisations working together to accelerate action on digital inclusion. Our vision is to reduce the digital divide and enable greater social and economic participation for everyone in Australia, highlighting the imperative for action and the value of key initiatives across the key pillars of digital inclusion: affordability, access and ability.

Today, with the compounding challenges of omnipresent technology adoption and increasing cost-of-living pressures, there is an unprecedented imperative to address digital inclusion, to help people engage online and ensure they are skilled and literate to participate in a confident, safe and productive manner.

[1] Measuring Australia's Digital Divide, Australian Digital Inclusion Index, 2023: https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ADII-2023-Summary_FINAL-Remediated.pdf

In fact, the stakes are higher than social equity and personal potential, with the ubiquity of digital media platforms and the emerging challenges and opportunities of Artificial Intelligence (AI) throwing up new challenges in terms of online harms, misinformation and disinformation, and confidence in civil institutions, to name a few, as well as significant potential benefits should the various accessibility, skills and ethics considerations by effectively managed.

Furthermore, it is now clear that reducing digital exclusion can deliver significant economic benefits. Indeed, a conservative outlook recently put forward by Good Things Australia, estimates a near half billion dollar national economic contribution that could be delivered through increased digital participation of 'highly excluded' cohorts[2]. The figure would be higher if 'excluded' people were included too.

The relevance of digital inclusion is far-reaching and traverses government responsibilities, including health and education, future jobs and skills, First Nations, financial security, aged care, disability support and more. In each and every space there is both a role for digital technology and therefore a need for attention to digital inclusion that will increase in relevance as trends in digital transformation continue.

In 2025 and for the foreseeable future, it is imperative that governments meaningfully address digital inclusion in a way that hasn't been executed in the past. Indeed, while there are already a significant number of initiatives and programs, designed to both inform policy development and deliver impact through a range of organisations and mechanisms, it is timely to consider how the Australian Government can address the challenges and opportunities in a coordinated and cohesive manner, to reduce fragmentation and recognise the interconnected nature of digital exclusion in society and across areas of government responsibility.

To that end, on behalf of our members and digitally excluded Australians we call for a coordinated national strategy and responsible portfolio that recognises the vital importance of digital inclusion, its relevance across the economy and society, and facilitates effective implementation across different portfolios and agencies, as well as relevant academic, community and not-for-profit organisations and businesses working in the space.

While successful existing programs should continue to attract support, including around affordability, access and ability, we submit that there is currently a significant opportunity for a concerted and coordinated focus on ability as a way to maximise impact. That is, ensuring people have skills to participate in life, learning and work, and literacy to confidently embrace new tools and platforms and to engage in a way that minimises harms and maximises potential.

[2] The Economic Benefits of Overcoming Digital Exclusion, Good Things Australia, 2024: https://goodthingsaustralia.org/news/economic-benefits-of-overcoming-digital-exclusion-report

RATES OF DIGITAL INCLUSION

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) 2023[3] shows that overall digital inclusion rates have improved in recent years, however there remain significant challenges and gaps for certain cohorts of society, and varying performance in the key pillars of affordability, access and ability.

Nationally, our most recent digital inclusion index score is 73.2, however there is a considerable digital gap of 7.5 between First Nations and non-First Nations people, which increases significantly for those living in more remote locations[4]. Across the general population, while the gap continues to narrow, there is a persistent divide between capital cities and other parts of the country, with exclusion increasing the further people live from major centres.

The ADII estimates some 9.4% of the Australian population is 'highly excluded', and 14.2% remain digitally 'excluded'. That's about 24% of the population lacking the resources to participate in contemporary social, economic, and civic life, with disproportionate representation from those who have a disability or live in public housing, who have not completed secondary schooling and/or are over 75 years of age.

ADII figures highlight improvements in affordability (95 index score), albeit with the most recent survey results preceding the current cost-of-living crisis, as well as access (72 index score), however it notes that advances are uneven across society. Among the key pillars, digital ability lags with a national index score of just 64, with widening gaps between the employed and unemployed, and those with tertiary education compared to those who didn't complete secondary school.

Other sources highlight some of the personal concerns of digitally excluded Australians. According to consumer research by Good Things Australia, almost three quarters (73%) of people with disability don't feel comfortable keeping up with changes in technology and the internet, with 38% needing help to keep up with rapid changes in technology. First Nations people, women and older people all reported higher levels of discomfort in keeping up with changes in technology and the internet[5].

Overall, the Good Things research found that more than half of Australians don't feel comfortable keeping up with tech changes, and one in four need help. These are important insights, highlighting a desire for people to gain new skills and literacy to support their engagement in the digital world. They also bring focus to affordability, with one in two respondents stating that cost-of-living increases have affected their ability to get online.

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[3] Measuring Australia's Digital Divide, Australian Digital Inclusion Index, 2023: https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ADII-2023-Summary_FINAL-Remediated.pdf

[4] First Nations Dashboard, Australian Digital Inclusion Index, 2023: https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/dashboard/firstnations.aspx

[5] Australian Attitudes to Getting Online, Good Things Australia, 2024: https://goodthingsaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Aus-Attitudes-to-Getting-Online-Report-2024-.pdf

DIGITAL INCLUSION MATTERS

Digital inclusion is increasingly essential for equitable access to education, employment, and social engagement, among many other aspects of civic and economic participation. Government services are increasingly digital, media and information is predominantly digital, while AI is creating new opportunities and raising new challenges in the way people engage with technology at home, school and work - all highlighting the importance of digital affordability, access, skills and literacy.

While the principles of digital inclusion may be anchored in equity and social good, empowering people to participate in contemporary society, the impact is also economic. Indeed, a recent study shows a potential national economic contribution of nearly half a billion dollars through the increased digital participation of excluded Australians across a range of key activities.

The analysis commissioned by Good Things Australia calculated the combined economic benefit of reducing digital exclusion through appropriate training and financial support. It found that enabling highly digitally excluded people to advance from unemployed to employed status or to a more skilled job, to access volunteer work, to overcome social exclusion, to use telehealth, access myGov, access online retail and improve financial safety, would enable a national economic benefit of $467.2 million annually[6].

Furthermore, the analysis is a conservative measure, based only on 'highly excluded' cohorts identified by the ADII and the benefit would be higher if expanded to include the more general 'excluded' category. And, it is reasonable to anticipate that additional benefits with flow-on positive economic impact may be enabled by digital inclusion, for example, starting a business, safety during emergency events, environmental benefits from reduced driving, reduced need for cash and trips to banks, and education. Recognising the important support of Telstra, in collaborative partnership with RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology, for the ADII, more investment in research, data collection and reporting is essential to fully understand the vital importance of digital inclusion for priority cohorts including education outcomes, healthcare, and access to government services among other aspects.

The Australian Government, like many across the country and the world, is investing strongly in the digitisation of public services. The stated goal of the government's 2030 digital vision[7] is to use data and digital technologies to improve service delivery and decision-making, to achieve *"better outcomes for all people and business."*

As so much of the world goes digital, and citizen expectations evolve accordingly, it makes sense for government services to head in this direction. According to recent Mandala research, where public services are reliable, accessible, efficient and secure, citizen usage proves to be far higher. Where

[6] The Economic Benefits of Overcoming Digital Exclusion, Good Things Australia, 2024: https://goodthingsaustralia.org/news/economic-benefits-of-overcoming-digital-exclusion-report
[7] Data and Digital Government Strategy, Australian Government Digital Transformation Agency, 2023: https://www.dataanddigital.gov.au/

good practice is followed and adoption accelerated, digitisation of public services could reduce government service costs by $12 billion and save citizens 800 million hours over 10 years, the research found[8].

Digital exclusion is shown to have a negative impact across a spectrum of important measures and to exacerbate other aspects of social and economic exclusion[9], not limited to poorer educational outcomes, challenges for victims of family and domestic violence finding safety and restarting their lives, job-seekers not being able to find meaningful employment, poorer access to essential services like telehealth, and increased isolation and lack of connection, especially for seniors and people with disabilities.

A recent study in NSW brought that exclusion into focus, with survey respondents reporting challenges engaging in basic tasks to get on with life. The survey found one in five people felt they lacked the necessary skills to perform important online tasks such as job searching, working, studying or accessing government services. And the issue was more pronounced among those aged 65+, from low-income households or whose highest education level is high school[10].

Challenges also exist around the intersection of digital inclusion and financial inclusion. Banking services are increasingly provided online with a requisite level of digital capability and access required in order to access these fundamental services.

Online and social media has also transformed the news media and information landscape in rapid time, with a changing mix of media outlets and changing habits of how people consume content. While most Australians use several forms of media on a weekly basis, online sources have significantly grown in popularity.

Research by the Australian Media Literacy Alliance[11] (AMLA) highlights the intersection between digital inclusion and media literacy, going to the need for people to analyse, as well as access, use and create media in the current and emerging environment. Greater attention to this linkage is also a reflection of increasing concerns about misinformation, with associated issues around trust and even civic cohesion. At a basic level concerning financial security, 62% of Australians simply aren't confident in identifying an online scam, while 52% are worried scams are getting harder to spot[12] while the progression towards online banking raises important questions about the confidence and skills people need to update their habits.

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[8] Assessing the Benefits of Accelerated Digital Delivery of Government Services, Mandala Partners, 2024: https://mandalapartners.com/reports/adobe-cost-of-delay-report

[9] The role of Digital Exclusion in Social Exclusion, Carnegie UK, 2016: https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2016/09/LOW-2697-CUKT-Digital-Participation-Report-REVISE.pdf

[10] NSW Digital Strategy, Digital NSW, 2024: https://www.digital.nsw.gov.au/strategy

[11] Adult Media Literacy in 2024: Australian Attitudes, Experiences And Needs, Australian Media Literacy Alliance, 2024: https://medialiteracy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/AML2024_report_final-compressed.pdf

[12] Australian Attitudes to Getting Online, Good Things Australia, 2024:https://goodthingsaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Aus-Attitudes-to-Getting-Online-Report-2024-.pdf

According to AMLA research, most Australians believe that a diverse range of media literacy abilities are relevant to their lives and they consider them to be important. Indeed, while almost 90% of adults made a recent decision based on an online source, about half of respondents reported encountering false or misleading information online in the week prior to being surveyed.

Meanwhile, 70% of those who are familiar with how algorithms determine what content they see want to learn more about how they work and 80% of adults want the spread of misinformation to be addressed. Almost everyone (94%) who wants misinformation to be addressed agrees that people need to be taught how to identify misinformation.

AMLA's analysis also draws focus to the emerging challenges of AI, a set of technologies widely accepted to present significant positive opportunity and potential adverse consequences across society. Indeed, the Australian Government is making substantial investments to manage the national AI opportunity, including initiatives such as standards and guidelines for safe and responsible development and use[13].

While a growing number of Australians have experienced using generative AI, they have also expressed reservations and a desire to learn more. Another notable insight highlights the value of digital and media literacy, with people with a high level of confidence in their media ability being far more likely to use AI, and therefore be more equipped to access the opportunities.

While AI highlights the importance of digital literacy as a means to harness emerging technology, there also remains a key opportunity to address very basic levels of digital inclusion to deliver meaningful impact. This dynamic is brought into focus by the impact of digital inclusion on educational outcomes created through the provision of laptop computers to school students. Surveyed before receiving a donated laptop, 84% of students indicated that they struggled to complete school work. Surveyed subsequently nine months later, 97% of students reported that the device had positively contributed to completing school work[14].

Importantly, following their experience using laptops, nearly all students reported increased confidence in using technology, indicating that access to devices plays an important role in increasing digital skills and literacy. Furthermore, the majority of students said the experience they had gained had increased their skills across a range of measures including device operations, information navigation, digital communications and creative digital.

Digital inclusion is increasingly a key factor in employment, impacting the ability for people to enter and progress in the workforce. Almost 90% of jobs require some level of digital skills while more than

[13] People Come First in Australia's New AI Safety Standard, Australian Government Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2024:
https://www.industry.gov.au/news/people-come-first-australias-new-ai-safety-standard
[14] Measuring the Impact of Digital Access for Schools Students, WorkVentures, 2024:
https://catalog.workventures.com.au/flip-book/366501/843779

half of all roles are advertised online[15]. Meanwhile, digital skills are recognised as the fastest growing emerging skills requirement[16] for employers, including for entry-level positions where digital tasks such as basic device operations or social media management are ancillary to the main job description.

As the Australian Government's own digital strategy[17] notes, there are considerable benefits to a more inclusive Australia where everyone has the same opportunity to participate - both socially and economically - and inclusion and accessibility should be embedded into the heart of everything the government does from a digital perspective. However, it is notable that this sentiment is expressed specifically with respect to the digitisation of government services, and not a broader consideration of affordability, access or ability to engage with such services or the extraordinary range of services, activities and functions that now require such consideration across society and the economy.

With 3.8 million Australians recognised as excluded or highly excluded and half a billion dollars of potential economic benefit together with broader social impact on the table, it is time for a coordinated approach that elevates digital inclusion as a matter of national importance.

PILLARS OF DIGITAL INCLUSION

Digital inclusion is a complex multi-factor challenge best viewed through a combination of enablers: affordability, access and ability.

In simple terms, these pillars involve:

- Affordable availability of quality internet and appropriate devices.
- Access to inclusively designed online content, that's readable and accessible, including if people are differently abled or from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- Ability, skills, literacy, knowledge and confidence to participate in the digital world.

As the ADII makes clear, there is increasing evidence that digital inequalities are both sequential and compounded, meaning these three dimensions must be understood and addressed together[18]. Indeed, there is evidence that the provision of digital devices can have a flow-on impact in skills and confidence, while in the big picture, someone who develops new digital skills may be better

[15] The Economic Benefits of Overcoming Digital Exclusion, Good Things Australia, 2024: https://goodthingsaustralia.org/news/economic-benefits-of-overcoming-digital-exclusion-report
[16] The state of Australia's skills 2021: now and into the future, National Skills Commission, 2021: https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-02/Australia's%20emerging%20skills.pdf
[17] Data and Digital Government Strategy, Australian Government Digital Transformation Agency, 2023: https://www.dataanddigital.gov.au/
[18] Measuring Australia's Digital Divide, Australian Digital Inclusion Index, 2023: https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ADII-2023-Summary_FINAL-Remediated.pdf

positioned for improved employment and earning prospects, increasing their capacity to afford the tools to further advance digital engagement for themselves and those around them.

However, it is worth noting that while ADII index scores continue to rise across the three pillars, scores for affordability (95) and access (72) continue to exceed ability, which lags with a score of 64.9 and notably, ability scores are in decline for people in the lowest income category and those over 75 years of age. The index report highlights the interconnectedness of this dynamic, with people with high levels of digital inclusion noted to be seeing steady gains in their digital ability levels, while declines in ability for certain cohorts are compounding the challenges of digital exclusion.

And, as noted in the recent *Australian Attitudes to Getting Online*[19] consumer survey, the effect goes both ways, with results demonstrating that there is a continued need to support people to learn digital skills. However, digital inclusion goes beyond skills and literacy, and digital ability programs must be complemented with digital affordability and access.

Affordability

While affordability ranks as the best performing key measure of digital inclusion, improving affordability of internet access and devices in the context of inflationary pressures and the cost of living crisis remains a key challenge. The ADII notes that improvement in the affordability score for its 2023 report could be attributed to reductions in the price of a quality internet bundle, and that internet affordability pressures remain pronounced for lower income Australians, including people with disability, public housing residents, those over 75 years old, those who are unemployed, and those living in remote parts of Australia, including First Nations people.

Indeed, the *Australian Attitudes to Getting Online* survey highlights how cost of living increases are impacting people's ability to get online. 2024 results showed that 49% are struggling to afford an appropriate internet connection or digital device, 3% higher than a year earlier. One in six Australians reported needing to choose between paying for digital connections or devices and other essential household costs such as food and housing, with disproportionate impact on younger people, First Nations people, and people with disability.

As digital services evolve and become ever more embedded in social, economic and cultural life, the capacity to afford a reliable, quality internet connection and the devices required for social participation has never been more critical.

[19] Australian Attitudes to Getting Online, Good Things Australia, 2024: https://goodthingsaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Aus-Attitudes-to-Getting-Online-Report-2024-.pdf

Internet

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) plays an important role advocating for improved outcomes in the affordability of internet services. It notes that 27.6% of households spend over 5% of their income on a standard internet bundle, while 48% spend 2-5% of their household income on internet connectivity.

Furthermore, ACCAN research[20] highlights considerable community concern about the pressure of internet affordability, including:

- 26% of communications consumers find their phone and internet costs are unaffordable.
- 57% of low-income households and individuals struggle to pay for an NBN service.
- 92% of communications consumers believe that all telecommunications companies should offer an affordable (base level) internet plan.

To that end, ACCAN recommends the implementation of a concessional broadband service[21] for households receiving Commonwealth financial support, delivering an unlimited 50/20Mbps service at a cost of around $30 per month for eligible households. It notes that introducing a concessional broadband product will improve the economic and social outcomes of low-income households through improved digital inclusion and provide direct cost-of-living relief to consumers.

We agree that investment to develop and implement a low-income broadband service is a unique opportunity to create meaningful impact for digital inclusion, buttressing against cost-of-living pressures and empowering cohorts of the community more likely to be digitally excluded.

Improvements to affordability can also be advanced by ensuring that consumers get the greatest possible value for money for each dollar of spend. The creation of a plan comparison tool would allow consumers to more quickly and easily search through the multitude of offers in the market.

This would allow for consumers to identify market offers that best met their needs, while also promoting competition amongst market participants. An independent plan comparison tool for internet and mobile telecommunications services as advocated by ACCAN would be an effective policy intervention, which would reduce cost of living pressures and reduce the impact of inflation on households.

It is also worthwhile to note initiatives such as Telstra Top Up delivered in partnership with InfoXchange, which provides free mobile services for people facing a range of challenges such as homelessness, domestic violence, or a natural disaster, or who need financial assistance.

Furthermore, there are a range of existing positive initiatives that contribute to internet affordability, particularly in remote areas, such as community Wi-Fi and the NBN School Student Broadband Initiative, that can contribute to relieving affordability pressures, and there is scope to extend and expand these initiatives.

[20] Research Snapshot - Affordability, ACCAN, 2023: https://accan.org.au/accans-work/research/2251-affordability-snapshot-2023
[21] Pre-Budget Submission 2025-26, ACCAN, 2024: https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/2383-pre-budget-submission-2025-26

Devices

As the ADII notes, suitable devices are a crucial enabler to improve how people can engage in the digital world. Alleviating the costs of these devices could be a huge contributor to better outcomes for those more likely to be digitally excluded.

Digital devices are a ubiquitous requirement for education, and surveys have shown significant concern for disadvantaged households, with the parents of more than half of families supported by The Smith Family[22] concerned their children are likely to miss out on the digital devices needed for their schoolwork because they can't afford them. As we have described, relatively small scale programs providing appropriate devices to school students have resulted in improved educational outcomes and increased digital ability.

Refurbishing and reusing appropriate devices presents an opportunity to help close the devices gap, and in doing so lift digital capability and reduce digital exclusion. Whilst not the only avenue to address the availability of affordable appropriate devices, there is scope for appropriate reuse to play an important role.

The biggest opportunity is in the reuse of devices no longer needed by corporates and the public sector. Due to consistent technology refresh cycles, these devices tend to be renewed more frequently than personal devices and so have a higher level of reliability. In addition, the logistics of collection of devices that are no longer needed can be more efficient when being done at the corporate and public sector level, rather than when collection is facilitated by individuals.

In just one year these refurbished public sector devices could support in excess of 500,000 students facing difficulties completing homework and assignments. Including devices from the corporate sector would increase the total pool of refurbished devices available to bridge the digital divide, and could contribute in excess of 1.4 million devices per year[23].

To that end, we endorse the implementation of a National Device Bank[24], building on existing feasibility work being undertaken by Work Ventures, Good Things Australia and Good360 among others, and recommended as a key affordability measure by the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group[25]. This involves a reorientation of policy from recycling to reusing, with a national device bank program geared to refurbish donated internet devices—like phones, tablets, and computers - from businesses and governments after their initial use. These devices would then be

[22] Nine in Ten Families Surveyed Worried They Will Struggle to Afford School Essentials, The Smith Family, 2023: https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/media/centre/releases/2024/nine-out-of-ten-families-back-to-school
[23] A Digital Inclusion Approach to Device Donation and Reuse, Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance, 2024: https://www.digitalinclusion.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/A-Digital-Inclusion-Approach-to-Device-Donation-and-Reuse.pdf
[24] Combatting the Digital Divide, Work Ventures, 2024: https://workventures.com.au/national-device-bank/
[25] First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap, First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group, 2024: https://www.digitalinclusion.gov.au/roadmap

distributed for free to individuals referred by community groups, consumer advocates, financial counselors, or through direct applications.

Access

Accessibility refers to supporting everyone to use the internet, including those living with disability, from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, or with other needs posed by current barriers built into online technologies. Key aspects underpinning such access include ensuring websites are compliant with the latest web content accessibility guidelines, and standards, such as the Australian Standard AS EN 301 549 requirements suitable for public procurement of ICT products and services.

With respect to the Australian Government's vision[26] to deliver connected public services, we commend the focus on ensuring all people can access and benefit from those services, including that all websites and services meet the latest web content accessibility guidelines, implementing the Digital Service Standard to embed best-practice service design and accessibility across the APS, and ensuring omni-channel service delivery to make digitally delivered services accessible by phone or face to face.

However, as we have noted previously and considering the intersectionality of digital exclusion, we urge the government to expand on the sentiment expressed in its strategy for government services to a more holistic approach to digital inclusion in general. There are obvious reasons and considerable benefits in making government services accessible online, however it stands to reason that to maximise the positive impact of these investments, government should address the capacity of digitally excluded people to use and benefit from such services.

Ability

As we have stated, while there is significant intersectionality between the three key pillars of digital inclusion, there is currently a significant opportunity for a concerted and coordinated focus on ability as a way to maximise impact on overall rates of digital exclusion, and complement efforts in affordability and access. That is, ensuring people have skills to participate in life, learning and work, and literacy to confidently embrace new tools and platforms and to engage in a way that minimises harms and maximises potential.

Indeed, digital ability itself traverses significant territory, from connectivity literacy[27], right across a spectrum of skills, including basic and advanced operational skills, information navigation, social, creative and automation. Increasingly, digital ability is becoming intertwined with media literacy, the

[26] Data and Digital Government Strategy, Digital Transformation Agency, 2023: https://www.dataanddigital.gov.au/
[27] Connectivity Literacy, Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia, 2020: https://birrraus.com/connectivity-literacy-2/

ability to analyse and apply critical thinking when considering and engaging with online content and services to minimise harm.

As we have shown, Australians lack confidence with many online tasks, and have concerns about AI, while it is worth noting that the government's National AI Capability Plan makes specific reference[28] to the need for AI skills and literacy uplift. Meanwhile, we know that digital skills and literacy are foundational for good education, improved employment outcomes, and the associated health of our economy. This much is made clear with the inclusion of digital preparedness as a key measure in the government's own Measuring What Matters Framework[29].

ADIA has long advocated for the recognition and implementation of a national common language around what it means to be digitally capable and we note the growing appreciation of this concept with key stakeholders including the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and Jobs and Skills Australia. We previously welcomed the government's recognition of the Australian Digital Capability Framework (ADCF) as the basis for Australia's national common language on digital capability[30]. Unfortunately, however, some time has elapsed since the ADCF has been updated and it is now out of date, with no reference to AI related skills.

A common language for digital capability ensures consistency in assessing, teaching and developing digital skills, and helping individuals, educators, policymakers and organisations adapt to the evolving digital landscape. It also enables a benchmark for digital literacy in a broadly understood way.

It is important that the benchmark for digital literacy is rooted in the common language and is designed to foster generalist entry-level skills. Further it is important that the common language be consistently updated to recognise the evolving nature of the digital environment, such as the arrival of AI.

We believe that the European Commission-developed Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp)[31] presents an optimal opportunity for Australia to implement a consistent approach to describing digital capability, combining the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to promote the confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society.

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[28] Developing a National AI Capability Plan, Australian Government Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2024: https://www.industry.gov.au/news/developing-national-ai-capability-plan
[29] Measuring What Matters, Australian Government Treasury, 2023: https://treasury.gov.au/policy-topics/measuring-what-matters
[30] ADIA welcomes the recognition of a digital capability common language in the Government's Employment White Paper, ADIA, 2023: https://www.digitalinclusion.org.au/adia-welcomes-the-recognition-of-a-digital-capability-common-language-in-the-governments-employment-white-paper
[31] Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp), European Commission: https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/education-and-training/digital-transformation-education/digital-competence-framework-citizens-digcomp_en

As such, ADIA recommends DigComp be recognised as the foundation for Australia's common language for digital ability, skills and literacy, and we would welcome the opportunity to collaborate, with other key sector stakeholders, in how it is implemented for the local context, including how it informs a definition of digital literacy, design of training packages where generalist digital skills are needed, research into digital ability and embedding digital ability into the National Skills Taxonomy.

Furthermore, it is crucial now to consider the importance of media literacy as a key element of digital ability, factoring in the role of critical analysis in engaging with online services and information. Among a number of suggestions, the Australian Media Literacy Alliance makes a key recommendation about the urgent need for media literacy education. It suggests that without intervention, emerging technologies are likely to widen existing gaps between those with a low and high level of confidence in their media ability, further exacerbating digital exclusion.

Meanwhile, effective existing programs delivering digital skills and literacy should continue to attract support and be expanded where appropriate. One example is the Be Connected program, which has demonstrated considerable success in building the ability of older Australians through a network of community organisations which are funded to deliver digital skills programs across the country. While there is certainly benefit in a targeted program for older people, the success of Be Connected does highlight the opportunity for similar programs that could also be delivered by community partners for different cohorts of digitally excluded people. For example, such an initiative may be effective for people in regional areas, where the ADII shows consistently lower inclusion scores than metropolitan areas.

We also acknowledge insightful findings of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group on the effectiveness of digital mentor programs that provide direct support and guidance for people getting online and seeking to improve their digital skills and abilities[32]. The announcement in the May 2024 Budget of funding to support these programs in remote communities was a positive and welcome response, however we agree with the Advisory Group's view about the potential for these programs to expand to other communities as well.

[32] First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap, First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group, 2024: https://www.digitalinclusion.gov.au/roadmap

SELECTED LANDSCAPE OVERVIEWS

As we have described, Australia faces a substantial challenge to overcome digital exclusion, with as many as one in four people unable to effectively participate in and engage in the digital world, with issues more pronounced across other areas of social and economic disadvantage. Nonetheless, there is significant opportunity in improving inclusion, with estimates of a near half billion dollars in national economic benefit on offer, should we seek to take on challenges across the spectrum of affordability, access and ability.

In this section, we seek to provide some additional flavour on the need and value of digital inclusion across selected areas of policy focus, highlighting the imperative for digital inclusion across different parts of the economy and society, and the need for a coordinated and cohesive approach to how we maximise future opportunity.

Jobs and Skills

Digital skills and literacy are widely accepted as key enablers for gaining employment and transitioning through the workforce. 87% of jobs require some level of digital skills while 56% of roles are advertised online and 25% through social media[33].

Indeed, digital skills have been recognised for some time as the fastest growing emerging skills requirement[34] by employers, including for entry-level positions where functions such as basic device operations or social media management may be simply 'part of the job'. Meanwhile, there is significant employment growth opportunity for tech-related jobs, with a national target for 1.2 million tech roles for 2030[35] across the economy and estimates of a potential 200,000 new jobs to be enabled by AI[36]. It is notable that when surveyed, more than half of young people expressed a desire for a job that uses advanced digital skills[37].

Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) notes the significance of foundation skills[38] - including the ability to read, write, and engage with technology - in their capacity to directly impact a person's economic and social wellbeing because they underpin successful participation in society and community, education and training, and the workplace.

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[33] The Economic Benefits of Overcoming Digital Exclusion, Good Things Australia, 2024: https://goodthingsaustralia.org/news/economic-benefits-of-overcoming-digital-exclusion-report
[34] The state of Australia's skills 2021: now and into the future, National Skills Commission, 2021: https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-02/Australia's%20emerging%20skills.pdf
[35] Number of Aussie Tech Workers on the Rise, Australian Government Minister for Industry and Science, 2023: https://www.minister.industry.gov.au/ministers/husic/media-releases/number-aussie-tech-workers-rise
[36] Meeting the AI Skills Boom, Technology Council of Australia, 2024: https://techcouncil.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Meeting-the-AI-Skills-Boom-2024.v2.pdf
[37] Australian Youth Digital Index, Telstra Foundation, 2024: https://australianyouthdigitalindex.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/AYDI-Report_Landscape_T_FA.pdf
[38] Better Together - The Jobs and Skills Report, Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024: https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/download/19681/jobs-and-skills-report-2024/2833/better-together-jobs-and-skills-report-2024/pdf

Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs) are a key mechanism of the Australian Government, established to provide all industries with a stronger voice to ensure Australia's vocational education and training (VET) sector delivers better outcomes for learners and employers. They bring together employers, unions and governments in a tripartite arrangement to find solutions to skills and workforce challenges[39].

As JSA notes, there is an identifiable gap in digital skills capacity across the board. One JSC, the Future Skills Organisation (FSO) has a specific heritage dealing with digital skills (as the former Digital Skills Organisation), and plays a key role in the development of digital capability, and the recognition of the need for a common language around digital ability.

Recognising a gap in foundational digital capability across the workforce[40] as digital *"becomes a critical skill in all roles,"* the FSO together with ADIA has advocated[41] for the implementation of a common language and national benchmark to describe the digital skills needed in work, learning and life - enabling people (and employers and trainers) to identify digital skill levels and the actions needed to progress to a higher level. This framework should take account of the generalist entry-level skills needed by the most digitally excluded cohorts, and could be achieved through the DigComp framework outlined in our ability section above.

As we have stated, we are highly supportive of a national common language for digital capability based on DigComp and recommend government collaborate with key digital inclusion stakeholders, including ADIA to inform its local implementation, including a definition of digital literacy, research into digital ability and embedding a digital ability standard into the National Skills Taxonomy[42].

Government Service Delivery

The Australian Government has a laudable goal to deliver simple, secure and connected public services for all people and business through world class data and digital capabilities. All things being equal, digital public services increase their utility, make life easier for citizens and achieve significant efficiencies for government.

A recent study highlighted the benefits, noting that where good practice is followed and adoption accelerated, digitisation of public services could reduce government service costs by $12 billion and

[39] Jobs and Skills Councils - Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Australian Government: https://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-reform/jobs-and-skills-councils
[40] Building a Skilled Workforce - Initial Workforce Plan, Future Skills Organisation, 2023: https://futureskillsorganisation.sharepoint.com/:b:/s/ExternalWebsitefiles/EdCEeb0tnW5JrdTfOAvwZL8BrQCMvkNt0AaRExvcoGJhwA?e=zhqVfu
[41] We need a Common Language for Digital Skills, Innovation Aus, 2023: https://www.innovationaus.com/we-need-a-common-language-for-digital-skills
[42] National Skills Taxonomy Discussion Paper, Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024: https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/national_skills_taxonomy_discussion_paper.pdf

save citizens 800 million hours over 10 years[43]. The report noted that where they were proven to be reliable, accessible, efficient and secure, citizen usage of public services proves to be far higher, unlocking potential.

Importantly, the same research noted benchmarking scores that showed Australia's performance for delivery of efficient and inclusive digital government services had risen ten points to 68 (out of 100) between 2021 and 2024, largely thanks to a 30% uplift in digital equity measures such as the ability for people to access, read and understand public content.

Further, it stands to reason that for digitally excluded people, digital public services remain out of reach, even as these same people are often more likely to need access to government support. As such, it is a positive development that where government is digitising public services, it is also maintaining phone and in-person access, however, it is worth considering how the effectiveness of digitisation investments could be further optimised by better coordinating efforts to lift digital inclusion across the community.

As we have noted, efforts to upskill the public service to deliver accessible digital services are a positive development, however, it would make sense for the principles underpinning this investment to be applied on the demand side of this equation.

Another important consideration for government when considering the effectiveness of digital public services, and the capacity for people to engage with them, is trust and the perception of whether the government is working for the community in a positive way[44]. For example, where every painful, time-wasting or out-of-reach interaction with government can lead to an erosion of trust, so to an efficient, accessible and rewarding digital interaction is an opportunity to enhance that dynamic.

For the very reason that the Australian Government sees value in digitising public services and ensuring they are accessible to as many people as possible, we submit that there is a crucial need for a digital inclusion strategy that serves to support people to maximise their use of those tools. This includes affordability measures around internet access and devices, as well as the skills and literacy people need to engage.

[43] Assessing the Benefits of Accelerated Digital Delivery of Government Services, Mandala Partners, 2024: https://mandalapartners.com/reports/adobe-cost-of-delay-report
[44] A Vision for Public Digital Work, James Plunkett, Medium, 2024: https://medium.com/@jamestplunkett/a-vision-for-public-digital-work-33460ec9aa48

First Nations

First Nations people in Australia endure a significant digital inclusion gap compared to non-First Nations people[45]. Overall the gap is 7.5 and it is more pronounced for First Nations people living in remote (24.4 points) and very remote (25.3 points) locations, but prevalent regardless of where First Nations people live.

As an important supplementary project of the Australian Digital Inclusion Index, Mapping the Digital Gap has been a vital new source of insight and data to inform and measure policy outcomes in this space and we welcome the ongoing funding support from Telstra for this initiative. Its recent report[46] noted the value of data collection to drive improvements in digital inclusion, pointing in particular to investment in improving remote communities telecommunications infrastructure in recent years, including a new mobile service and roll-out of Wi-Fi mesh networks or hotspots in several communities.

A key recent development has been the delivery of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap, a vital contribution by the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group[47]. The roadmap report makes a number of important recommendations with a long-term focus, looking to foster sustained and ongoing progress towards closing the digital divide for First Nations people. This builds on its Initial Report of June 2023, which led to $68 million of budget measures in the 2024 Budget to improve First Nations digital inclusion.

We have been heartened by the initial response to the roadmap report, and urge government to give high priority to the recommendations as a way to both address Outcome 17 of the Closing the Gap framework[48] in overcoming the inequality experienced by First Nations Australians while contributing to our broader national digital inclusion challenge. We encourage ongoing government support for the Advisory Group to continue to provide First Nations leadership to address Closing the Gap Outcome 17, as well as the data collection to measure progress on Target 17. We also encourage that solutions are place-based and co-designed to ensure they are fit for purpose to the local context.

Specifically, while supporting the Advisory Group recommendations, we encourage a strong focus on aspects including:

- Expand small cell mobile and community Wi-Fi networks to more in underserved communities.

[45] Measuring Australia's Digital Divide, Australian Digital Inclusion Index, 2023: https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ADII-2023-Summary_FINAL-Remediated.pdf

[46] Outcomes Report, Mapping the Digital Gap, 2024: https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2024-12/apo-nid329174_1.pdf

[47] First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap, First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group, 2024: https://www.digitalinclusion.gov.au/roadmap

[48] Target 17, National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020: https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/7-difference/b-targets/b17

- Establish a national device bank.
- Provide more funding for digital mentor programs.
- Affordable pre-paid mobile and fixed broadband services.
- Expanded measures to ensure safe access to online services.
- Audit of communications services to ensure quality and reliability, especially in wet season and during power outages and emergencies.

Minimising Online Harms

From misinformation and disinformation, to offensive content, predators and scams, there is no shortage of online harms consuming the attention of Australians and policy-makers alike. And where we seek to minimise online harms, it is vital to also recognise the positive opportunities provided by technology and the reality that solutions must be balanced with allowing people to access those benefits.

As the AMLA makes clear, digital and media literacy is a key component in developing such a balanced approach, particularly as AI changes the dynamic of how we perceive trust online. The ability to critically analyse digital information and services, is emerging as a crucial part of digital inclusion.

As we have noted, 62% of Australians don't feel confident they could identify a scam online, and half were worried scams are becoming harder to spot[49]. In the context that almost 90% of adults made a recent decision based on an online source, and about half reported encountering false or misleading information online in the week prior to being surveyed[50], the risks for harm appear significant.

Hearteningly, it appears that people are open to intervention and keen to understand more about how to empower themselves to engage with knowledge and confidence. For example, 70% of those who are familiar with how algorithms determine what content they see want to know more about them and 80% of adults want the spread of misinformation to be addressed. 94% of survey respondents who want misinformation to be addressed agree that people need to be taught how to identify misinformation. More than half of respondents want help to deal with scams and predators, identify trustworthy news, and identify and respond to misinformation.

Highlighting the gap in skills training, young people surveyed for the Telstra Foundation are most likely to learn online safety on their own, either by themselves or from the internet. Discussions with

[49] Australian Attitudes to Getting Online, Good Things Australia, 2024:https://goodthingsaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Aus-Attitudes-to-Getting-Online-Report-2024-.pdf

[50] Adult Media Literacy in 2024: Australian Attitudes, Experiences And Needs, Australian Media Literacy Alliance, 2024: https://medialiteracy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/AML2024_report_final-compressed.pdf

respondents revealed that most young people attribute their online safety skills to personal experience[51].

For these reasons, we raise the call for a coordinated approach across digital ability, making a linkage with media literacy to emphasise the delivery of key skills that empower people to engage appropriately and with confidence in the online environment.

INFRASTRUCTURE FOR IMPACT

It is important to recognise the unique structure of the ecosystem addressing digital inclusion through research, advocacy and program delivery. An illustration of this is the 500 plus business, government, academic and community organisations brought together by the ADIA.

Supported by Infoxchange, Telstra and Google, we work to enable collaboration and advocacy on key priorities for those organisations who work daily to accelerate action on digital inclusion. Guided by a strong governance and strategy committee - including representation from Infoxchange, Telstra, Google, TasNetworks, Queensland University of Technology, Good Things Foundation, The Smith Family, the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), Alannah & Madeline Foundation, The Inclusive Design Collective and Education Services Australia - our vision is to reduce the digital divide and enable greater social and economic participation for everyone in Australia.

As a society we are indebted to the many researchers and not-for-profits who understand at a visceral level the impact of digital exclusion and work so hard to create positive impact. We are also supported by commercial businesses that strive to contribute in a positive way to lift our national inclusion scores.

We appreciate the role of government and it is important to give credit to the many programs that are geared to address the key elements of digital inclusion. However, the digital inclusion ecosystem - including these programs - is by its nature fragmented, dependent on key stakeholders to navigate disconnected portfolios to thread together support for new initiatives.

As we have explained and is made clear in multiple creditable sources, digital inclusion is a complex and interconnected problem. Where digital exclusion exists, it is highly aligned with other aspects of social and economic disadvantage. And while there are three recognised pillars of digital inclusion, it is clear that affordability, access and ability exist in an interconnected dynamic and need to be addressed together in a coordinated cohesive way.

[51] Australian Youth Digital Index, Telstra Foundation, 2024: https://australianyouthdigitalindex.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/AYDI-Report_Landscape_T_FA.pdf

Therefore, we raise our call for a national digital inclusion strategy that recognises these realities, ties together the cross-jurisdiction and cross-portfolio nature of the challenge, and seeks to coordinate and maximise impact for all Australians to benefit from digital technologies now and in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance recommends:

- Government collaborate with ADIA and key digital inclusion stakeholders to develop a National Digital Inclusion Strategy, including the establishment of a key government responsibility to coordinate and prioritise digital inclusion programs and their delivery through the digital inclusion ecosystem.
- Investment in digital inclusion is required across all policy and program areas, from education to infrastructure, from community and social services to everyday civic and societal participation. Departments should be required to consider digital inclusion aspects of policy and program decisions, including opportunities to address digital exclusion.
- Investment in stronger mapping of the digital ability aspects of digital inclusion, including a linkage with digital and media literacy with respect to the emerging challenges of AI.
- Government collaborate with ADIA and key digital inclusion stakeholders for the implementation of DigComp as a national common language to describe digital ability, including a definition of digital literacy, research into digital ability across the community and embedding digital capabilities into the National Skills Taxonomy.
- Support not-for-profits in their technology capability and capacity to deliver digital inclusion initiatives in the community.
- Develop a concessional broadband product, addressing the affordable internet needs of low-income households.
- Support implementation of an independent internet plan comparison tool, allowing consumers to identify market offers that best met their needs.
- Implement a national device bank.
- Expand small cell mobile and community Wi-Fi networks to more in underserved communities.
- Prioritise the recommendations of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group as a way to both address Outcome 17 of the Closing the Gap framework in overcoming the inequality experienced by First Nations Australians while contributing to our broader national digital inclusion challenge.
- Provide ongoing government support for the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group to continue to provide First Nations leadership to address Closing the Gap Outcome 17, as well as the data collection to measure progress on Target 17.

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