Pre-Budget Submission 2020/21

Good Things Foundation Australia Submission

August 2020

Good Things
Foundation Australia

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the digital divide in this
country which, without urgent action, is at risk of becoming even
wider. A digitally included country is one where all citizens are
able to participate in the rapidly transforming digital economy,
maintain social connections and access online government and health
services, even in times of crisis. To support our communities to
recover from the pandemic and become more digitally resilient for
the future, this Federal Budget the Australian Government must:

1. Refund the Be Connected essential digital skills program for
   older Australians for a further five years (2021 - 2026) to
   support 1 million people.

2. Ensure all Australians have access to essential digital skills
   support, by expanding Be Connected, so the community is work-
   ready in a rapidly digitised business environment and can
   access online government services.

3. Fund a community-based digital health literacy support
   program, so all Australians have the skills and confidence to
   access reliable health information online and make full use of
   advancements in digital health, such as My Health Record and
   telehealth.

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

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a rapid increase in digitisation in all aspects of our society. Never before has it been so important to be digitally capable and online.

During the national shutdowns this year, Australian adults increased their internet usage, seeing it as essential for paying bills, accessing news and information, staying in touch with loved ones, working and entertainment.[1] The pandemic and associated lockdowns have seen a rapid digital transformation of many workplaces and essential services. This transition to a digital economy has been recognised by both Federal and State governments as key to our nation's economic recovery from the impact of COVID-19.[2]

However, 2.5 million Australians are not online[3] and an estimated 4 million people have limited digital skills and interest[4] putting them at extreme risk of being left further behind as our economy transforms.

Being digitally excluded means not having the access or ability to connect safely and confidently to the internet in an affordable way. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index identifies the people across Australia who are more likely to experience digital exclusion as being:

- Older Australians
- People on lower incomes
- People with lower levels of education
- Indigenous Australians
- People who have a mobile-only connection
- People with disability
- People out of the workforce
- People living in rural areas.[5]

See our Digital Nation Australia 2020 resource here for more insights on who is most likely to be left behind.

With the impact of COVID-19, many more are at risk of falling into the digital divide. Unemployment and underemployment rates have risen, seeing more people out of the workforce while the pandemic-

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[1] https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/Covid-19-impact-on-Australian-adults-online-report.pdf
[2] https://www.industry.gov.au/news-media/national-meeting-of-digital-economy-and-technology-ministers-communique-may-2020
[3] https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2019_Final_web_.pdf
[4] https://auspost.com.au/content/dam/auspost_corp/media/documents/research-report-digital-inclusion.pdf
[5] https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2019_Final_web_.pdf

led digital revolution is taking place. Existing points of
supplementary digital access including free wifi and computers, such
as community centres and libraries, have been closed due to COVID
physical distancing restrictions and are still slowly reopening
across the country. Seniors, who were one of the groups most
vulnerable to the virus and so most in need of remote support, were
the least likely age group to have the digital skills needed to
participate in online transactions, social supports and services.

Even while facing disruption themselves, community organisations who
provide digital skills programs have been providing even more
support to their communities, including by rapidly transitioning to
remote delivery models for digital skills support services.[6]
However, more needs to be done to reach those most vulnerable to
being left behind.

Digital skills deliver a fairer economy, a stronger society and
better lives; but only if everyone has the support they need to
thrive in the digital world. The 2020/21 Federal Budget is an
opportunity to support initiatives that ensure all in our community
are digitally able to access online government and health services,
connect with family and friends safely, search for and apply for
jobs and maintain employment in a digitally transformed society as
our country recovers. If we don't invest now, the digital divide is
at risk of widening because of the impacts of the pandemic.[7]

Good Things Foundation Australia thanks the Australian Government
for the opportunity to make this submission to the 2020/2021 Federal
Budget and recommends action on four priority digital capability
areas.

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[6] https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au/research-publications/reinventing-digital-literacy-support-crisis
[7] https://www.ceda.com.au/Digital-hub/Blogs/CEDA-Blog/April-2020/How-COVID-19-is-worsening-digital-inequality

Refund Be Connected for 5 years to support 1 million people

The Australian Government's Be Connected program was a 2016 election commitment and formally began in October 2017 to increase the digital skills and confidence of older Australians. Since its launch, the program has helped 750,000 people through a blended face-to-face and online delivery model. Good Things Foundation Australia built, supports and manages the national Be Connected Network of over 3,000 community organisations located in all Australian states and territories who provide free digital mentoring support to people over 50 through this program. Be Connected is run in partnership with the eSafety Commissioner, who manage the Be Connected Learning Portal, and the Department of Social Services.

Over the three years that the program has been running, a highly successful model has been implemented by the lead agencies and thousands of community partners, which has been rapidly adapted to meet the needs of people through the pandemic.[8] As National Network and Grants program manager for Be Connected, we have seen the impact that capacity building local digital mentors in community organisations has on delivering digital skills support for older Australians when combined with high quality online learning resources.

Positive Impact of Be Connected 2017-2020

The diverse Be Connected Network includes libraries, community centres, CALD community groups, senior's computer clubs, aged care, retirement villages and men's sheds located in communities across the country. Through our Network, 12,400 digital mentors have been recruited to help people to learn in a safe and friendly environment. To support these trusted volunteers and staff on the frontline of digital literacy for older Australians, we have created 300+ upskilling resources which have been downloaded 98,000 times, and hosted 200+ professional development webinars. The Be Connected Learning Portal, used by the Network to support people, has 154 learning activities aimed at over 50's with low digital skills available for free on the website. Additionally, $15m in small grant funding has been awarded across 2,000+ community organisations in under three years, ranging in value from $1,500 to $50,000.

Our recent grants review has shown that as a result of receiving this funding, organisations in the Network were able to:

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[8] https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au/research-publications/reinventing-digital-literacy-support-crisis

- Increase the interest of older people in their communities in improving their digital skills and raise awareness of the benefits of getting online
- Provide direct support to improve the digital skills, confidence and online safely of over 50's
- Increase the digital skills of their own staff and volunteers

Our network of community organisations has demonstrated that they connect with their communities and support them to learn in ways that more broad-based communication channels can't. As a result of the Be Connected program:

- 85% of Be Connected learners reported increased digital skills and confidence using the internet
- 85% learners are more confident using the internet
- 77% learners increased their social connections due to the support they received.

In addition, learners highly value the support they have received through the program, with:

- 87% satisfied or very satisfied with the support they received from a local Be Connected Network Partner
- 91% satisfied with the content on the Be Connected Learning Portal.

This support has meant that hundreds of thousands of older Australians have been better able to stay connected with friends, family and services and participate in the digital world during the pandemic and beyond. Read stories about the Be Connected program's impact in the community.

But, even with the significant impact of the Be Connected program to date, there are still many more older Australians who need support to be digitally confident, safe and resilient as the digital world around them rapidly evolves.

Existing funding arrangements for the Be Connected essential digital skills program for over 50's is due to expire in June 2021. This successful program needs to be extended for a further 5 years (2021-2026) to support 1 million more older Australians to improve their digital literacy.

Recommendation

1. Continue funding the Be Connected program to support people over 50 to gain essential digital skills for a further 5 years. In addition to ongoing support for the development and

management of the Be Connected Learning Portal by the eSafety Commissioner, this must include at least:

a) Funding over five years from 2021-2026.
b) $3m per year for management and upskilling of the delivery network of 3,000 community organisations, including management of a best practice small grants program.
c) $5m per year for small grant funding of community organisations delivering digital literacy supports directly to older Australians.
d) $1m per year to market the program, reaching more older people in need with the support of the network.

Essential, work-ready digital skills for all Australians

Extending the Be Connected program for five years will support older Australians to gain essential, basic digital skills. But, it is not just older Australians who need this community-based support from trusted, local providers.

The pandemic has seen millions of people newly out of work, working reduced hours, or on government income subsidies, and we know that unemployment, not participating in the workforce and low incomes put people at higher risk of digital exclusion.[9] Meanwhile, Australian workplaces, businesses and services have been experiencing rapid digital transformation. To get back into the workforce, apply for, gain and maintain work or run small businesses in this new operating environment, and undertake online professional development activities to improve employability, digital skills are essential.

Due to the impacts of COVID-19, many more people are accessing government support programs such as those offered by Centrelink, and need digital skills to navigate online application forms and reporting procedures. When the new MyGov learning module was released by the eSafety Commissioner on the Be Connected Learning Portal during the pandemic, it became one of the most visited topics, showing the high need for digital skills support to access online government services.

We know from years of experience that digital skills programs work when there is a combination of high-quality online learning resources with local, tailored, skilled support in community settings. Some commendable initiatives have already been announced

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[9] https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2019_Final_web_.pdf

by Governments to support people to be digitally work-ready, including through the VET sector. But, more needs to be done to ensure everyone in our communities are digitally resilient, safe and confident.

The trusted, skilled digital mentors in the 3,000 strong national Be Connected Network are set up to build on existing digital literacy and community support program offerings to reach those aged 18 - 50 years who may otherwise fall through the gaps. This is essential to minimise the digital divide and create a nation ready to fully participate in the digital economy.

The Be Connected program has been tested, is already in place and has growing community recognition. With additional funding, it can be extended to reach adults of all ages and backgrounds to provide a digital safety net and ensure that everyone has the essential digital skills they need to get back into the workforce, reskill, access online government services and supports, and participate in the rapidly transforming digital world, as our economy recovers.

Recommendation

1. Extend the community-based essential digital skills support program Be Connected to cover all adults of all ages, including those most at risk of digital exclusion aged under 50 years. This program extension must provide funding and resources in addition to that required to maintain the program for over 50's:

   a) Additional funding for the Be Connected program over a 5 year period, extending the reach from people over 50 to include adults aged 18 - 50 years.
   b) $1m per year over 5 years to coordinate and capacity build an expanded network of community organisations. This would include upskilling digital mentors and creating new mentoring resources on work ready and intermediate digital skills, and accessing relevant online government services.
   c) $3 million per year over 5 years in small grants to support program delivery by the network of community organisations.
   d) Quality online learning content on appropriate work ready and intermediate digital skills to be delivered through the network of community partners in blended face-to-face and remote delivery models.

Prioritise digital health literacy supports

Significant advancements have been made in digital health technologies during the pandemic. Telehealth - patients and medical professionals interacting via a digital device - has seen a rapid rise in use, reaching over 7 million patients.[10] However, one of the most significant barriers facing the digital health agenda is how to engage those hardest-to-reach and introduce them to digital health services, given low or no digital health literacy skills and barriers with confidence or motivation to get online. Even before COVID-19, the digital divide was recognised in Australia's National Digital Health Strategy.[11]

Digital health literacy means that consumers can benefit from important government initiatives such as My Health Record, electronic prescribing, access information through Health Direct or online mental health services such as Head to Health, as well as access a range of online information, tools, apps and resources safely and understand if that information is reliable and trustworthy.

Good Things Foundation Australia's Health My Way program, funded by the Australian Digital Health Agency and delivered through our Network in 70 communities across Australia, has shown that despite the challenges of the pandemic, with funded, locally provided, tailored support, people at risk of digital exclusion can better participate in the digital health environment, including making use of government applications such as My Health Record. After participating in our pilot, community-based Health My Way program, 80% of people increased their digital health literacy skills and confidence.

Our Network of community organisations has raised awareness in their communities of digital health literacy by sharing our easy-to-understand resources to over 3,000 people, such as how to find reliable health information online about COVID-19, and providing one-on-one or group-based support to build practical digital health skill sets and confidence.

As a result of the support received from our community partners, program participants took actions such as:

- joining walking groups or online community support groups to lose weight
- approaching their doctors about creating My Health Record or adding their personal information to My Health Record

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[10] https://business.nab.com.au/2020-the-year-telehealth-came-of-age-41241/

[11] https://conversation.digitalhealth.gov.au/sites/default/files/adha-strategy-doc-2ndaug_0_1.pdf

- creating myGov accounts and linking to My Health Record independently post the training session.

Further, our experience working in the UK using similar, co-designed placed-based models shows a six-to-one return on investment from digital health literacy initiatives, as well as improvements in people feeling less lonely and isolated.[12] These programs are run in partnership with the National Health Service (NHS) and have included initiatives on managing diabetes, supporting people with cancer, supporting the socially isolated and homeless, assisting people with dementia and their carers, and improving digital skills for nurses, among others.

The existing Be Connected Network of 3,000 community organisations is well-placed to rapidly scale and deliver digital health literacy programs to at-risk Australians and vulnerable clients, broadening the reach of the Health My Way program from the 70 organisations who have been enabled to participate to date.

To make use of the rapid developments in digital health as we recover from the pandemic, increase access to online government health services, and ensure people are obtaining reliable health information online, both health professionals and consumers need to be digitally capable and confident.

Recommendation

1. $3.5m per year for 3 years to broaden out the Health My Way digital health literacy program to build community capability in accessing digital health supports through high-quality, impactful, funded community-based learning models. This must include:

   a) $2m per year to capacity build and grow our network of community organisations, upskill on best practice digital health mentoring, create mentoring resources, and develop quality online digital health learning content that can be delivered through blended face-to-face and remote delivery models.
   b) $1.5m per year in small grant-funding distributed nationally across 300 participating community organisations, enabling their program delivery.

2. Continue to invest in building the digital capability of the Australian health workforce, including professional development on supporting patients with low digital literacy.

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[12] https://digital-health-lab.org/

Improve digital access at home for at risk Australians

All Australians must have access to an affordable, internet-connected device at home to be able to find and maintain work, access essential services and stay socially connected. A lack of access to internet connected devices at home at affordable rates is a major barrier to the full participation of people in the digital economy and the continuous improvement of their digital skills.

In April 2020, 75% of organisations in our network said that their older members lacked digital devices to use at home.[13] This impacted their ability to remotely deliver digital skills programs and keep isolated people connected during social distancing measures. And, it's not just older Australians who are impacted. A recent report by The Smith Family shows many school-aged children and tertiary students from disadvantaged families have an additional barrier to undertaking remote learning activities during the pandemic due to lower levels of digital access.[14]

With the support of the Australian Government earlier this year, the Digital Devices Grant saw $1 million of funding awarded across 215 community organisations through the Be Connected program. It provided 1,400 loan devices and data to older Australians at a critical time alongside remote support to use their new tech, having a significant positive impact. There have also been welcome initiatives introduced during COVID from telcos and NBN Co to reduce the cost of devices and data at this critical time.

However, this funding and support alone does not meet the high level of need and will not support Australians to have improved access to our digital economy and enhanced digital capability to participate in it when the pandemic's rapid response measures end.

Funding is needed to ensure all Australians at higher risk of digital exclusion have access to appropriate and affordable internet connected devices at home. Without it, the digital divide will further widen and many will be left out of our nation's digital-led COVID-19 recovery.

Recommendation

1. Improve digital access for Australians at risk of digital exclusion by ensuring affordable and appropriate internet

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[13] https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au/research-publications/reinventing-digital-literacy-support-crisis
[14] https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/about-us/media/the-smith-family_insights-snapshot_may-2020.pdf?la=en&hash=ECCFA02466429BECB0B17F61F860BC4F

connected devices are available in all homes during the COVID-19 recovery period and beyond.

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, the UK and Kenya.

In Australia, we have built and manage the Australian Government funded Be Connected Network of 3,000 community partners and deliver the $20 million grants program to support people over 50 to learn essential digital skills. 750,000 people have been engaged and supported by the Be Connected digital literacy program to date.

We coordinate the national digital inclusion campaign Get Online Week which last year supported 26,000 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 through the 5,000 strong Online Centres Network and worked in Australia since 2017.

Learn more about our work: www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au
See our resources for community organisations:
www.beconnectednetwork.org.au

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