



# Digital inclusion: tackling the digital divide

TasCOSS 2025/26  
Budget Priorities Statement



## About TasCOSS

TasCOSS's vision is for one Tasmania, free of poverty and inequality where everyone has the same opportunity. Our mission is two-fold: to act as the peak body for the community services industry in Tasmania; and to challenge and change the systems, attitudes and behaviours that create poverty, inequality and exclusion.

Our membership includes individuals and organisations active in the provision of community services to Tasmanians on low incomes or living in vulnerable circumstances. TasCOSS represents the interests of our members and their service users to government, regulators, the media and the public. Through our advocacy and policy development, we draw attention to the causes of poverty and disadvantage, and promote the adoption of effective solutions to address these issues.

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## Executive Summary

Being connected is something most of us take for granted. It's intertwined into our daily lives — whether that's looking for work, accessing government services (including health services), engaging in education or training, paying bills or connecting with community and friends. So much of what we do, day-to-day, relies on a secure, reliable, fast internet connection and the skills to navigate the web.

The increasing prevalence of digital technologies in almost every aspect of our daily lives provides opportunities for increased economic and social inclusion, improved health and wellbeing, and greater productivity. It also poses risks that those who face barriers to digital inclusion will fall further behind, particularly Tasmanians who are older, on low incomes and living in regional areas.

The digital economy will continue to deliver huge social and economic benefits, but those benefits are not being equally shared. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) confirms Tasmania is the second-most digitally disadvantaged state or territory in the country, having languished at the bottom of the table for the last decade. It identifies that one-in-four Tasmanians (more than 144,000 people) face some form of barrier to digital inclusion and 54,000 Tasmanians are either unable to get online, or if they can, lack the ability to navigate the online world.<sup>1</sup>

The Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (PESRAC) Final Report found the current approach to improving digital inclusion in Tasmania is piecemeal and responsibility for digital inclusion is fragmented and spread across multiple government departments. It highlighted Tasmania's poor digital literacy and the pressing need for measures to improve accessibility and affordability. It recommended clear, whole-of-government key performance indicators (KPIs) be set to close the digital divide.

Yet, more than four years on from PESRAC's Final Report, recommendations which were committed to in full by the Tasmanian Government are still not implemented. Tackling the digital divide requires long-term investment, particularly in relation to digital skills and affordability for people on low incomes.

The economic and social benefits of tackling the digital divide in Tasmania are worth around \$13.5 million per year to the Tasmanian economy and \$54 million over the Forward Estimates.<sup>2</sup> These benefits relate only to digital inclusion as a driver of employment growth, social inclusion, enhanced wellbeing and greater productivity, with further potential benefit derived from the impact of digital inclusion on education and the adoption of artificial intelligence technologies.

The upcoming 2025/26 State Budget is critical for investment in digital inclusion programs to close the digital divide in Tasmania. The Government must take the lead to improve digital inclusion outcomes and ease cost of living pressures impacting Tasmanian households through long-term investments across four key focus areas for government, including digital access, digital affordability and digital skills.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas, J et al. (2023), [Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2023](#), ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and Telstra, Melbourne.

<sup>2</sup> Good Things Australia (2024), [Economic Benefits of Overcoming Digital Exclusion](#).

## Summary of Recommendations

In the 2025/26 State Budget, TasCOSS seeks commitments from the Tasmanian Government to:

### Whole-of-Government

1. Deliver on the PESRAC Final Report recommendations relating to digital inclusion, in particular prioritising Recommendation 34 and setting clear, whole-of-government KPIs for closing the digital divide.
2. Establish a digital consumer advisory group to inform government on digital inclusion barriers and advise on investment in digital strategies, programs and initiatives to increase digital inclusion outcomes in Tasmania.

### Digital Access

3. Work with industry, communities and consumers to explore more widespread provision of secure, free public Wi-Fi and internet facilities in regional towns.
4. Ensure all government secondary school students have access to their own devices and data to enable them to do schoolwork, homework and online-schooling.

### Digital Affordability

5. Reduce the cost of telecommunications by introducing a Tasmanian Government telecommunications concession for low income households to access data services.
6. Work with telecommunications providers to develop a low cost broadband product available for low income households.

### Digital Skills

7. Double funding levels for *Digital Ready for Daily Life* to boost digital skills and literacy programs, including investment in a community-based network of coaches and peer workers to support priority groups, in particular people who have low literacy and numeracy skills.
8. Invest in Tasmanian ICT industry outreach initiatives to educate and train the community services industry workforce in digital skills and literacy, so they can support their clients to access services online and build digital capability.
9. Support the Tasmanian ICT industry to build scam, cyber security and artificial intelligence awareness into digital literacy programs designed for the community services industry and community groups.

## Key Data

- ✘ Tasmania is the second-most digitally disadvantaged state or territory in the country and has consistently lagged behind the other states.<sup>3</sup>
- ✘ Tasmania has the lowest score for digital literacy and skills levels of all jurisdictions in the country.<sup>4</sup>
- ✘ One-in-four Tasmanians (144,000 people) experience at least one barrier to digital inclusion — digital access, affordability or digital skills/ability.<sup>5</sup>
- ✘ 54,000 Tasmanians are highly digitally excluded, meaning they are either unable to get online, or if they can, lack the skills to navigate the online world.<sup>6</sup>
- ✘ 46% of consumers said the rising cost of living has affected their ability to get online, with one-in five choosing between paying for internet and other essentials.<sup>7</sup>
- ✘ One-in-three households on the lowest incomes report phone and internet being unaffordable.<sup>8</sup>
- ✘ Broadband costs are increasing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas, J et al. (2023), [Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2023](#), ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and Telstra, Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Good Things Foundation Australia (2023), [Australian Attitudes to Getting Online](#), consumer research, October.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (2023), [Affordability Snapshot](#).

<sup>9</sup> NBN Co (2024), [NBN Co publishes wholesale tariff list for FY25 and wholesale pricing roadmap \(FY25-FY27\)](#), media release, 1 May 2024.

## Digital Inclusion in Tasmania

When we talk about digital inclusion, we mean the ability of people or groups to enjoy the benefits of being online and using technology confidently to improve their day-to-day lives.

A digitally included Tasmania is one where all Tasmanians can participate in our digital economy to find and maintain work, access education, health and government services, maintain social connections, and find reliable information, especially in times of crisis.

Those who lack this capability are considered to be 'digitally excluded.' Digitally excluded people miss out on the social and economic benefits that digital technologies provide. When you consider how crucial internet access is to our daily lives, being digitally excluded compounds other forms of disadvantage.

To create a more digitally included community, there are three main elements to address:

- **Access** — the availability of the internet and connected devices.
- **Affordability** — the financial means to get online.
- **Digital Ability** — skills to use the internet and devices confidently and safely.

### The Impact of Digital Exclusion

The consequences of digital exclusion for our economy and community are being acutely felt. Tasmanians have told TasCOSS of the very real impacts of digital exclusion, including children unable to do homework due to a lack of appropriate devices and inadequate data, people missing telehealth appointments because their data expired and they couldn't afford to buy more, and community service providers not conducting core service delivery and instead spending hours each week just helping people navigate online government services.

Tasmanians told TasCOSS through the Regional Emerging Issues Forums we conducted in 2024 that they experience low levels of digital literacy across all age groups and experience connectivity challenges in rural areas.<sup>10</sup> Community members identified barriers to accessing information, online services, online learning, community engagement and opportunities due to limited access to devices, inadequate internet infrastructure and the internet being intermittent or not available. They also expressed a vulnerability to scams and online fraud due to low digital literacy. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) suggests these fears may be justified, with more than \$738 million in reported losses and more than half a million scams reported since 2023.<sup>11</sup>

Community members proposed a range of solutions to improving digital inclusion, including increased funding for targeted programs to improve both basic literacy and digital literacy skills across all age groups, provide access to devices, improve internet infrastructure (particularly in remote areas), and increased education about online safety and protecting them from scams.

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<sup>10</sup> TasCOSS (2024), Regional Emerging Issues Forums — North-West (Penguin), 2 May 2024; North (Ravenswood), 24 July 2024 & South (Huonville), 8 August 2024.

<sup>11</sup> ScamWatch (2024), [Scam statistics](#), Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, accessed 18 December 2024.

## Government Action on Digital Inclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us of the necessity of digital inclusion, as working from home, online education, telehealth and online shopping became essential. The main way to connect socially was online and in that time of crisis, the internet was an essential tool for finding government information, health advice and warnings.

Following the pandemic, we're living in a new normal where digital inclusion is more important than ever. Providing Tasmanians with digital skills and affordable access to data and devices is necessary to support our community to stay connected, find employment, further education and access essential services.

### PESRAC Response

In 2021, the PESRAC Final Report highlighted digital inclusion as a priority area for action, in particular improved digital literacy, appropriate equipment and affordable online access.<sup>12</sup> The Government committed to implementing all the PESRAC recommendations, yet little progress in implementing the recommendations relating to digital inclusion have been reported.<sup>13</sup>

The Final Report found the current approach to improving digital inclusion in Tasmania is piecemeal and fragmented. Multiple programs to address specific areas of need are administered by different government agencies and organisations.

The Final Report also found the current funding allocated to digital literacy programs and initiatives is insufficient to produce material improvements in Tasmania's digital inclusion. It recommended setting clear, whole-of-government KPIs for closing the digital divide within the next two to five years.

These findings have been affirmed by the Tasmanian Audit Office. In its report on the Government's COVID-19 response to digital inclusion released in June 2022, it concluded the Government was not doing enough and the "responsibility for digital inclusion is currently fragmented and spread across various government agencies." It reiterated PESRAC's recommendation to take stronger action by setting "KPIs and timelines for closing the digital divide."<sup>14</sup>

The Final Report recommended improving digital inclusion across Tasmanian communities as a priority. We urge the Government to deliver on its commitment to tackle the digital divide and implement PESRAC's recommendations relating to digital inclusion.

### Recommendation:

- 1. Deliver on the PESRAC Final Report recommendations relating to digital inclusion, in particular prioritising Recommendation 34 and setting clear, whole-of-government KPIs for closing the digital divide.**

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<sup>12</sup> Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (2021), [PESRAC Final Report](#), Department of Treasury and Finance.

<sup>13</sup> Hon Peter Gutwein MP (2020), '[Government to implement all PESRAC Recommendations](#),' media release, 18 August 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Tasmanian Audit Office (2022), [Report of the Auditor-General No. 7 of 2021-22: COVID-19 — Response to Social Impacts: Mental Health and Digital Inclusion](#), Tasmanian Government.



## Digital Inclusion Strategy

The 2023/24 State Budget allocated \$150,000 for the development of a *Digital Inclusion Strategy* that was expected to bring government, industry and community stakeholders together to develop an agreed set of priorities for digital inclusion across agencies, as well as develop performance indicators to measure initiatives.<sup>15</sup>

The proposal for a new *Digital Inclusion Strategy* reflects a commitment from the Government to improve collaboration and develop performance measures to address the digital divide, which has not been evident post-release of the PESRAC Final Report.

Addressing the identified fragmentation and piecemeal approach by government to digital inclusion, and bringing together key stakeholders to evaluate and review a range of digital inclusion activities, as well as setting some achievable goals for tackling the digital divide in Tasmania, must be the key goals of the *Digital Inclusion Strategy*.

## ICT Investment

The Government's *2030 Strong Plan for Tasmania's Future* commits around half a billion dollars to grow Tasmania's ICT and advanced technologies industries. Across the range of initiatives this policy supports, there is little funding to build digital ability. Only \$300,000 (or 0.06% of this spending) can be identified as committed to digital inclusion programs.<sup>16</sup>

Libraries, Online Access Centres (OACs) and Neighbourhood Houses perform a vital but under-resourced role in supporting digital inclusion, especially in regional areas. They provide Wi-Fi facilities, computers, printing, digital skills classes, and one-on-one advice and assistance.

The pressures on some of these facilities in regional areas are exacerbated by the significant loss of essential face-to-face services. This has led to increased demand from people needing to access services digitally, and increased pressure on libraries, OACs and Neighbourhood Houses.

There is a need for significant, long-term investment in a range of programs to support digital inclusion through libraries, OACs and Neighbourhood Houses, as well as a range of targeted investments beyond these organisations that support regional communities and priority groups, with greater levels of digital exclusion. This may include:

- Ongoing programs to build skills and literacy, recognising many people need long-term support to become and stay comfortable online;
- Mobile and roaming services to reach those communities where there are not dedicated digital inclusion services;
- Loaning programs for people who cannot afford the devices and data they need; and

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<sup>15</sup> Department of Treasury and Finance (2023), [Budget Paper Number 2, Volume 1](#), Tasmanian Government.

<sup>16</sup> Hon Madeleine Ogilvie MP, '[ICT and advanced technology industries to benefit from whole-of-government approach](#),' media release, 20 March 2024. The 2024/25 Tasmanian State Budget allocated \$150,000 over two years to Council on the Ageing (COTA) Tasmania to develop digital inclusion initiatives for older Tasmanians, including peer education.

- Expanded free Wi-Fi and computer hubs for communities where there might be no free access points at all.

With the Government's key digital inclusion programs through Libraries Tasmania and OACs under review and no funding for *Digital Ready for Daily Life* beyond this 2024/25 Financial Year, the next State Budget is critical for digital inclusion strategies and investment in tackling the digital divide in Tasmania.

## Support for Digital Consumer Advisory Group

Critical to improving Tasmania's digital inclusion outcomes is understanding the needs of consumers, particularly those consumers experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. TasCOSS consultations with industry, government, academia and consumers have identified broad support for the establishment of a digital consumer advisory group to advise on initiatives to tackle the digital divide in Tasmania.

At present, there is no formal structure for representing consumer interests, nor a mechanism for direct input to the Government on digital inclusion issues affecting Tasmanians. TasCOSS proposes a digital consumer advisory group be established to represent the views and needs of all consumers to the Government.

The digital consumer advisory group will elevate the voice of everyday consumers to support the Government in the development and implementation of its digital strategies, programs and initiatives to materially increase digital inclusion outcomes in Tasmania. It will bring together a broad range of digital consumers, comprising of stakeholders representing government, business, ICT industry, community and consumers with a lived experience of digital exclusion.

The establishment of a digital consumer advisory group also aligns with strategic priorities and actions under the [Tasmanian Community Services Industry Plan \(2021-31\)](#) that the Government is supporting through its investment in the community services industry's workforce development.<sup>17</sup>

The Industry Plan identifies digital technology as a key opportunity for driving changes in the community services industry in Tasmania, but also highlights digital access and skills as key areas to address for both service providers and service users.

### Recommendation:

- 2. Establish a digital consumer advisory group to inform government on digital inclusion barriers and advise on investment in digital strategies, programs and initiatives to increase digital inclusion outcomes in Tasmania.**

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<sup>17</sup> TasCOSS (2021), [A Community Services Industry Built for Tasmania's Future](#), Tasmanian Community Services Industry Plan (2021-31).

### **Case Study: TasALERT App**

On 25 August 2024, the Government launched the TasALERT app, Tasmania's official emergency information and warnings platform. The app was purpose-built and designed to provide a central source of timely emergency information and warnings.

The value of the TasALERT app was quickly realised the following week as significant storm and weather events impacted communities in central, north and north-west Tasmania. There were 42,000 app downloads during this week. Damage was sustained to more than 20% of Tasmania's electricity network and power disrupted to 150,000 customers, some of whom were disconnected for over ten days.

The Government supported eligible residents who had been impacted through Emergency Assistance Grants. These were accessible by applying online — accessing a website, registering an account, completing an online application and uploading identification. There were regular reminders from government to 'download the TasALERT app' for emergency information, 'visit the TasRECOVERY website' and 'apply online' for financial assistance.

Inherent in this government messaging were a number of assumptions regarding the digital capability of impacted communities. Firstly, it demonstrated the reliance there now is on digital solutions and digital access for staying connected, communicating essential information, accessing government services and supporting communities. It also assumed that people were not impacted by power outages and would have been able to recharge devices, and use Wi-Fi or computers without interruption.

But the key flawed assumption was that there is universal access to digital devices, the internet and the ability to navigate the online world.

We know that one-in-four Tasmanians face barriers to digital access, with almost one-in-ten Tasmanians unable to navigate the online world. That meant during the week-long period that 42,000 people downloaded and accessed the TasALERT app, there were potentially another 10,000 Tasmanians who were unable to do so.

TasCOSS was made aware of instances where impacted residents who could get online had difficulty logging into and navigating the online grants system. Demonstrating their vital role in our communities, Neighbourhood Houses were inundated with community members seeking information, advice and support, particularly with getting online to access government services and supports.

This case illustrates the importance of tackling the digital divide, so that Tasmanians aren't excluded from accessing the internet and the important benefits it delivers, whether that be life-saving emergency information, seeking support in times of need, or participating in daily life through employment, education, essential services or social connection.

It also serves as a reminder that although digital solutions are an efficient and effective way to deliver information and services to the community, there must be non-digital alternatives available to ensure those who experience barriers to digital inclusion are still able to access essential information, advice and services.

## Benefits of Overcoming Digital Exclusion in Tasmania

The economic and social benefits of tackling the digital divide have been quantified in a recent report from Good Things Australia.<sup>18</sup>

The report provides a valuable assessment of the impact that digital exclusion has on the Australian economy and the benefits that overcoming digital exclusion will have on individuals and society as a whole.

The findings conservatively estimate that investing in digital inclusion training and financial support will return almost half a billion dollars in annual economic benefits. For Tasmania, that equates to around \$13.5 million per year to the Tasmanian economy and \$54 million over the Forward Estimates.

The report outlines digital inclusion as a driver of employment growth, social inclusion, enhanced wellbeing and greater productivity. Supporting the 54,000 highly digitally excluded Tasmania's to participate in the digital economy would deliver an average benefit of \$249 per person/year.

The main benefits to our economy would be through greater use of telehealth, more volunteers and upskilling workers. Key social benefits for the highly digitally excluded are people being less isolated, less lonely and more connected. The report also measures safety benefits of closing the digital divide for the most digitally excluded at more than \$235 per person/year, through fewer people being scammed and more people aware of how to be safer online.

The benefits to government include better and more efficient access to government services, with productivity benefits for accessing online health services estimated at \$316 per person/year through better access to telehealth and saved travel and time.

There are many more potential benefits that are not measured in the report. The impact of digital inclusion on education and employment outcomes was not assessed, and this is likely to raise the value of inclusion benefits by a very large margin above these preliminary estimates. Additionally, the adoption of artificial intelligence technologies is rapidly increasing, suggesting the costs of exclusion are only going to increase further as we go forward.

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<sup>18</sup> Good Things Australia (2024), [Economic Benefits of Overcoming Digital Exclusion](#).

## Addressing Tasmania's Digital Divide

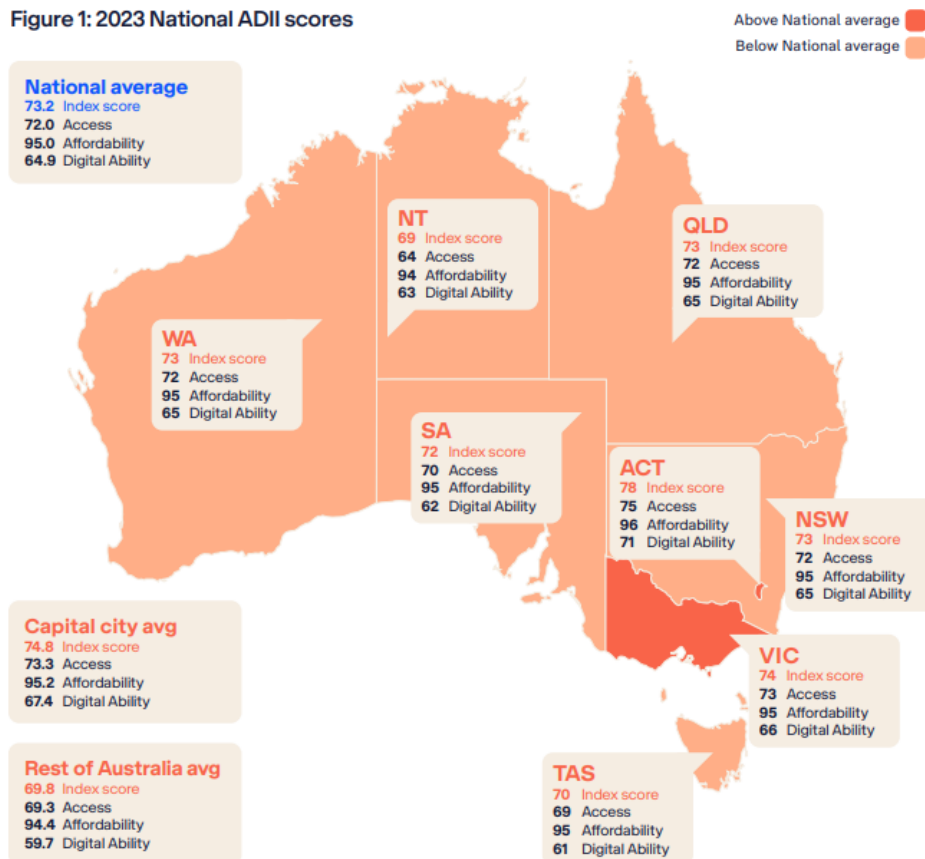
### Australian Digital Inclusion Index

The 2023 Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) revealed Tasmania is the second most digitally disadvantaged state or territory in the country. Figure 1: 2023 National ADII scores (*pictured below*) shows Tasmania's digital inclusion score (70.0) is below the national average (73.2) and the lowest of all states, with only the Northern Territory behind us. Tasmania also recorded the worst digital literacy and skills score in the country (61.0), effectively locking out Tasmanians from fully participating in economic, social and community life.<sup>19</sup>

There are also concerning trends borne out in the ADII data, with Tasmanians with low levels of income, education and employment, those living outside of Hobart and Launceston, older Tasmanians, Aboriginal Tasmanians and those living in public housing, all reporting higher rates of digital exclusion than the rest of the state's population.

Tasmania's poor performance relative to the rest of the country is the result of under-investment and a lack of policy ambition that has Tasmania continuing to languish at the bottom of the table for digital inclusion. Closing the digital divide requires significant, long-term investment, particularly in relation to digital skills and affordability for Tasmanians on low incomes.

Figure 1: 2023 National ADII scores



<sup>19</sup> Thomas, J et al. (2023), [Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2023](#), ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and Telstra, Melbourne.

## Digital Access

Not having access to reliable digital technology and the internet is a key characteristic of digital exclusion. Older Tasmanians and those with lower incomes remain well below the national average and other population groups for digital access.

Access scores are increasing at the national (72.0) and Tasmanian (69.0) levels, but Tasmania's access score still lags behind the national level in 2020 (69.4).

### Recommendations:

- 3. Work with industry, communities and consumers to explore more widespread provision of secure, free public Wi-Fi and internet facilities in regional towns.**
- 4. Ensure all government secondary school students have access to their own devices and data to enable them to do schoolwork, homework and online-schooling.**

## Digital Affordability

Not being able to afford access to digital technology is a key characteristic of digital exclusion. Tasmanians on lower incomes spend a significantly higher proportion of their income on communications, than those on higher incomes. TasCOSS consultations have revealed that some low income Tasmanians consider home internet connection a luxury, while others make sacrifices so their family can be connected.

While affordability has improved at the national (95.0) and Tasmanian (95.0) levels since 2020, some groups experience much greater levels of affordability stress, meaning they would need to pay more than 5% of household income to maintain quality, reliable connectivity. Substantial numbers of Tasmanians continue to experience affordability stress, including Tasmanians with disability, living in social housing, older Tasmanians and those currently unemployed.

### Recommendations:

- 5. Reduce the cost of telecommunications by introducing a Tasmanian Government telecommunications concession for low income households to access data services.**
- 6. Work with telecommunications providers to develop a low cost broadband product available for low income households.**

## Digital Ability

Digital capability, skills and confidence have a significant impact on a person's level of digital inclusion. Even if they can afford internet access and appropriate devices, a low level of skills or confidence is a barrier to digital inclusion.

Digital ability has improved at the national (64.9) and Tasmanian (61.0) levels, but despite these improvements Tasmania's digital ability score is behind the national level in 2020 (63.6) and is the worst in the nation. Tasmanians who are older, and with lower income, employment and education levels, demonstrate a lower level of digital ability than other population groups.

**Recommendations:**

- 7. Double funding levels for *Digital Ready for Daily Life* to boost digital skills and literacy programs, including investment in a community-based network of coaches and peer workers to support priority groups, in particular people who have low literacy and numeracy skills.**
- 8. Invest in Tasmanian ICT industry outreach initiatives to educate and train the community services industry workforce in digital skills and literacy, so they can support their clients to access services online and build digital capability.**
- 9. Support the Tasmanian ICT industry to build scam, cyber security and artificial intelligence awareness into digital literacy programs designed for the community services industry and community groups.**

