



Tasmanian Council of Social Service Inc.

SUBMISSION TO THE 26TEN ADULT LITERACY STRATEGY CONSULTATION

APRIL 2025



INTEGRITY
COMPASSION
INFLUENCE

About TasCOSS

TasCOSS' 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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Introduction

TasCOSS welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the consultation for the Adult Literacy Strategy.

TasCOSS commends 26Ten for their work to date on improving adult literacy in Tasmania. We support their stated commitment to taking a collective impact approach, including its three high-level goals, as well as its commitment to investing resources and effort over the long term to lift adult literacy rates in this state.

Our submission answers one of the guiding questions for the consultation:

What aspects of literacy should be included in the new strategy?

As the peak body for the community services industry in Tasmania, TasCOSS brings practice experience and policy knowledge to adult literacy, with a particular focus on two critical aspects of literacy – digital literacy and health literacy. In our view, the new Adult Literacy Strategy needs to incorporate both of these aspects of adult literacy, in addition to foundational aspects such as reading, writing and numeracy.

Key aspects of adult literacy

HEALTH LITERACY

The importance of health literacy

Good health literacy is critically important for people's ability to manage their health effectively, participate in healthcare decisions, and prevent illness where possible. It also plays a significant role in promoting community health and wellbeing.¹

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare says health literacy is necessary for people to successfully:

- Navigate health systems and understand information provided in healthcare settings including primary health care, specialist care and hospitals.
- Critically analyse and use sometimes conflicting health information from a range of sources, including health practitioners, health consumer bodies, advocacy organisations, social media and advertising.²

However, many Tasmanians find it hard to access health information and services, to understand information and use information to make informed choices. As noted on the HeLLoTas! website, almost two in three Tasmanians, including one in three with a university degree, lack the health literacy skills to manage their health and wellbeing. Most Tasmanians do not:

- understand or remember health information;
- know how to access services;
- know who to see and when to fill in forms;
- tell service providers what they need to know;
- know how to arrange appointments, routine immunisations and screenings; or
- know how to prevent health problems or pick them up early.³

Tasmanians who experience lower health literacy skills are more reliant on services, healthcare providers, hospitals and emergency services. They also find it difficult to use

¹ <https://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/standards/nsqhs-standards/partnering-consumers-standard/health-literacy>

² <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/what-are-determinants-of-health#literacy>

³ <https://www.hellotas.org.au/what-is-health-literacy>

programs to improve their health.⁴ Over the longer-term, low health literacy contributes to poor health outcomes for individuals, families and communities.⁵

The Health Literacy Action Plan 2019-2024 has now expired – and there's an evident need for the Department of Health to develop and publish a new plan for the next period. It makes good policy and practical sense for the Adult Literacy Strategy to include reference to, and ensure synergies with, a forthcoming Health Literacy Action Plan, as evident in the Action Plan for 2019-2024.

TasCOSS's role in health literacy in Tasmania

TasCOSS delivers the HeLLOtas! Project, funded by Public Health Services in the Tasmanian Department of Health and Primary Health Tasmania. The purpose of the funding is to build health literacy responsiveness in the community and health services sector. Organisations can play a strong role in making it easier for people to find, navigate, understand and use services. Organisational health literacy entails:

- Providing clear information to help people make informed decisions.
- Engaging with people in a friendly and welcoming manner.
- Having clear and easy-to-navigate processes.
- Involving people in decision making.

Focusing on organisational health literacy supports organisations to make it easier for people to find, understand and use the information and services they need for better health and wellbeing.

The HeLLOtas! Project works with the community services industry and health care providers to increase the profile of health literacy and support organisations to improve health literacy responsiveness. TasCOSS engages service providers through workshops, presentations, conferences, conversations, network meetings, and partnerships. TasCOSS also maintains the project's dedicated website which provides a toolkit for community service organisations to develop their health literacy:

<https://www.hellotas.org.au/>.

TasCOSS also delivers the Smoking Cessation Project which aims to decrease the rates of nicotine use among community service organisation clients and staff, by creating a

⁴ <https://www.hellotas.org.au/what-is-health-literacy>

⁵ https://www.health.tas.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-11/Health_Literacy_Action_Plan_DoHTasmania2019.pdf

Community of Practice and funding small-scale community-level education programs for smoking cessation.

DIGITAL LITERACY

The importance of digital literacy

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) conceptualises digital inclusion as consisting of three interrelated elements: digital access, affordability and ability.⁶ All three of these elements are of particular concern in Tasmania, which has had the lowest overall score for digital inclusion of all states in Australia not just last year, but for the past seven years.⁷ The aspect of digital inclusion which is relevant to adult literacy is digital ability or digital literacy.

The ADII provides a good overview of the critical importance of digital ability and the need to engage in continuous learning:

As digital devices and services become more embedded in daily routines, the Digital Ability needed to navigate them is crucial to ensuring fair and equitable access to essential services and online opportunities. Just as digital tools constantly evolve, so too do the skills required to use them effectively. Identifying what online abilities you need to be considered digitally included is a moving target. Without digital skills, a person cannot access and use the internet effectively. And, as new devices are released, maintaining up-to-date digital skills requires ongoing investment. Digital Ability is thus not a static set of skills, but rather an ongoing process of development and maintenance.⁸

Tasmanians have told TasCOSS of the very real impacts on them arising from digital exclusion. At the TasCOSS Regional Emerging Issues Forums conducted in 2024, Tasmanians told us that they experience low levels of digital literacy across all age groups. They also expressed a vulnerability to scams and online fraud due to low digital literacy. Community members proposed a range of solutions to improving digital inclusion, including increased funding to targeted programs to improve basic literacy and digital literacy skills across all groups, as well as increased education about online safety and protecting them from scams.

⁶ https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ADII-2023-Summary_FINAL-Remediated.pdf

⁷ <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/interactive-data-dashboards/>

⁸ <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/case-study-taking-a-deep-dive-into-digital-ability/>

Resourcing and commitment needed for digital inclusion, especially digital literacy

In our most recent Budget Priorities Statement on digital exclusion, TasCOSS noted that, four years on from PESRAC's Final Report, recommendations which were committed to in full by the Tasmanian Government are still not implemented. Our budget submission emphasised that, "tackling the digital divide requires long-term investment, particularly in relation to digital skills and affordability for people on low incomes."⁹

To that end, TasCOSS made several policy recommendations for improving digital inclusion, including these three which relate to digital ability or digital inclusion:

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 scams, cyber security and artificial intelligence awareness into digital literacy programs designed for the community services industry and community groups.¹⁰

Additionally, in our *2025 Federal Election: TasCOSS Priorities* statement released in March 2025, TasCOSS again made recommendations for the next Federal Government to improve digital inclusion for Tasmanians, including two recommendations focused on improving digital literacy:

- Fund investment in digital skills programs to support priority groups at greater risk of being left behind, including people who have low literacy and numeracy skills.
- Fund initiatives to build awareness of scams, cyber security and artificial intelligence into community digital literacy programs.¹¹

⁹ <https://tascoss.org.au/budget-priorities/digital-inclusion/>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ <https://tascoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025-Federal-Election-TasCOSS-Priorities-Digital.pdf>

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

Include health literacy and digital literacy in the new Adult Literacy Strategy, as two key aspects of adult literacy.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Coordinate with the Tasmanian Department of Health to ensure that the new Adult Literacy Strategy is compatible with and provides support to the next Health Literacy Action Plan.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Coordinate with Tasmanian Government agencies, including the Department for Education, Children and Young People (DECYP) and the Department of Premier and Cabinet, to ensure that the new Adult Literacy Strategy is compatible with and provides support to other government initiatives focused on improving digital literacy.