



Tasmanian Council of Social Service Inc.

OUR DIGITAL FUTURE – Consultation Paper

May 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 this opportunity to make a submission in response to the consultation paper to initiate a refresh of the Tasmanian Government's *Our Digital Future* strategy.

Background

So much of what we do daily relies on an internet connection and the skills to navigate the web. The digital economy delivers huge social and economic benefits, however, those benefits are not being equally shared. There are tens of thousands of Tasmanians who face barriers to digital inclusion and are at risk of falling further behind the rest of the community.

Tasmania is the second-most digitally disadvantaged state or territory in the country with one-in-four Tasmanians facing some barrier to digital inclusion and 54,000 Tasmanians highly digitally disadvantaged, meaning they are either unable to get online, or if they can get online, are unable to navigate the online world.¹

The consultation paper identifies that investing in digital infrastructure and skills is critical for innovation, productivity and economic growth, as well as playing a vital role in enhancing public services, improving quality of life and ensuring sustainability.² It further states that accelerating the digital transformation requires significant investment in new systems and skills development.³ The consultation paper also outlines the barriers to adopting digital technologies including high costs, lack of digital skills and concerns about privacy and security.⁴

A recent report by Good Things Australia estimates 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 four years. 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 (AI) technologies.⁵

TasCOSS encourages the Tasmanian Government to take the lead in improving digital inclusion outcomes in Tasmania and through the *Our Digital Future* strategy refresh, outline long-term actions and measures across the key focus areas of digital access, affordability and digital ability, to close the digital divide.

¹ 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.

² DPAC (2025), *Our Digital Future Refresh – Consultation Paper*, Tasmanian Government, p1.

³ Ibid p2.

⁴ Ibid p2.

⁵ Good Things Australia (2024), *Economic Benefits of Overcoming Digital Exclusion*.

Consultation Paper Response

Themes, Objectives and Priorities

TasCOSS submissions in recent years have called for action to address many of the themes, objectives and priorities identified in the consultation paper. TasCOSS supports the inclusion of the following themes and priorities that will address the key elements of digital inclusion for Tasmanians - access, affordability and digital ability:

Theme: Strengthen digital infrastructure

Priorities: Improve broadband connectivity across the state.
Build cyber resilience to protect digital assets.
Establish a dedicated digital infrastructure co-investment fund.

Theme: Empower and include the Tasmanian community

Priorities: Enhance digital literacy programs.
Facilitate affordable access to digital devices and internet services.
Support initiatives that promote digital accessibility for disadvantaged groups and people with disabilities.
Address digital divide issues in rural and remote areas.
Foster community engagement in digital initiatives.

Theme: Build digital skills and inspire the next generation

Priorities: Promote digital skills development in schools and universities.
Support lifelong learning and upskilling initiatives.

Key Consultation Questions

What digital capabilities should be the focus of the strategy refresh?

According to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), Tasmania has the lowest score for digital literacy and skills levels of all jurisdictions in the country.⁶

Through TasCOSS consultations across all age groups, Tasmanians have told us that they experience low levels of digital literacy resulting in barriers to accessing essential information, online services, online learning, social and community engagement, and a vulnerability to scams and online fraud.

⁶ 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.

The PESRAC Final Report found the level of funding allocated to digital literacy programs and initiatives is insufficient to produce material improvements in Tasmania's digital inclusion.⁷ As noted in the consultation paper, *"significant investment in new systems and skills development"* is required to address the challenge of digital literacy.⁸

There is a need for significant, long-term investment in a range of programs to support digital skills and literacy. This includes better resourcing libraries, Online Access Centres (OACs) and Neighbourhood Houses that perform vital roles in supporting digital inclusion – such as providing Wi-Fi facilities, computers, printing, digital skills classes and one-on-one advice and assistance - especially in regional areas.

TasCOSS recommends the strategy refresh outlines a range of targeted investments in digital literacy and skills programs that support regional communities and priority groups, and recognising that individuals with more complex or greater levels of digital exclusion may need long-term support to become and stay comfortable online.

What digital solutions will have the highest impact on your community, organisation or industry?

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.

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.

The PESRAC Final Report highlighted digital inclusion as a priority area for action, in particular improved digital literacy, appropriate equipment and affordable online access.⁹ The Tasmanian Government committed to implementing all the PESRAC recommendations,¹⁰ yet little progress in implementing the recommendations relating to digital inclusion has been reported.

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. It further recommended improving digital inclusion across Tasmanian communities as a priority.

⁷ Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (2021), PESRAC Final Report, Department of Treasury and Finance.

⁸ DPAC (2025), *Our Digital Future Refresh – Consultation Paper*, Tasmanian Government, p2.

⁹ Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (2021), PESRAC Final Report, Department of Treasury and Finance.

¹⁰ Hon Peter Gutwein MP (2020), 'Government to implement all PESRAC Recommendations,' media release, 18 August 2020.

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.”¹¹

TasCOSS recommends the strategy refresh outlines how the Tasmanian Government will 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.

What digital services would you like to see government implement to better serve the community?

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.

A 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). 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.¹²

TasCOSS recommends the strategy refresh includes establishing 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² TasCOSS (2021), A Community Services Industry Built for Tasmania’s Future, Tasmanian Community Services Industry Plan (2021-31).

What are the key barriers to digital technology adoption for your community, organisation or industry? How can we address these barriers?

The consultation paper has identified some key barriers including high costs, lack of digital skills, resistance to change and concerns about data privacy and security. TasCOSS agrees with the consultation paper that addressing these barriers is essential for successful digital innovation.¹³

From our consultations with Tasmanians, community members also identified the following barriers to getting online and accessing information, online services, online learning and community engagement:

- limited access to devices;
- inadequate internet infrastructure resulting in the internet being intermittent or not available;
- unable to afford internet plans;
- lack of digital skills and literacy; and
- a vulnerability to scams and online fraud (due to low digital literacy).

The ADII confirms Tasmania is the second-most digitally disadvantaged state or territory in the country. 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.¹⁴

The ADII also revealed particular population groups experience higher rates of digital exclusion than the rest of the state's population. These include:

- Tasmanians with low levels of income;
- Tasmanians with low levels of education;
- Tasmanians without employment;
- Tasmanians living outside of Hobart and Launceston;
- older Tasmanians;
- Aboriginal Tasmanians; and
- Tasmanians living in public housing.

Addressing the barriers Tasmanians face relating to access, affordability and digital ability requires significant, long-term investment, particularly for priority population groups experiencing higher rates of digital exclusion. Failing to support those Tasmanians who face barriers to digital inclusion risks them falling further behind.

TasCOSS recommends the strategy refresh prioritises digital inclusion programs that support regional communities and priority groups with greater levels of digital exclusion, including:

- working with industry, communities and consumers to explore more widespread provision of secure, free public Wi-Fi and internet facilities in regional towns;

¹³ DPAC (2025), *Our Digital Future Refresh – Consultation Paper*, Tasmanian Government, p2.

¹⁴ 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

- action to ensure all government secondary school students have access to their own devices and data to enable them to do schoolwork, homework and online-schooling;
- action to reduce the cost of telecommunications by introducing a Tasmanian Government telecommunications concession for low income households to access data services; and
- working with telecommunications providers to develop a low cost broadband product available for low income households.

What skills and training are most needed to support the development and deployment of digital solutions?

With the rapid development of emerging technology like AI and the risks posed by scams and cyber security, holistic digital skills programs spanning new technologies are essential, not just for priority population groups, but also the community organisations that support them.

The community services industry in Tasmania requires additional support to keep up with technology, ensure its information and data is secure, access efficiencies new technology offerings can deliver and to educate and support its clients and service users.

The *Digital Technology in the Not for Profit Sector* report identified more than half of the staff and volunteers in community organisations are not confident in using their organisations' digital technology, with the biggest barrier to building their digital capability being funding and budgets.¹⁵

TasCOSS recommends the strategy refresh includes initiatives to help and support individuals and community organisations to keep up with emerging technology, cybersecurity and AI so the digital divide does not increase, such as:

- investing 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; and
- supporting the Tasmanian ICT industry to build scam, cyber security and AI awareness into digital literacy programs designed for the community services industry and community groups.

¹⁵ Infoxchange (2024), Digital Technology in the Not-for-Profit Sector Report 2024.

Recommendations

TasCOSS makes the following recommendations to be addressed in the *Our Digital Future* strategy:

1. **Develop a range of digital inclusion programs that target digital skills and literacy to support priority groups and regional communities.**
2. **Outline how the Tasmanian Government will 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.**
3. **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.**
4. **Work with industry, communities and consumers to explore more widespread provision of secure, free public Wi-Fi and internet facilities in regional towns.**
5. **Action to ensure all government secondary school students have access to their own devices and data to enable them to do schoolwork, homework and online-schooling.**
6. **Action to reduce the cost of telecommunications by introducing a Tasmanian Government telecommunications concession for low income households to access data services.**
7. **Work with telecommunications providers to develop a low cost broadband product available for low income households.**
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 AI awareness into digital literacy programs designed for the community services industry and community groups.**