

Libraries and Community Centres – Regional SA's Digital Lifelines

The digital world has become an essential part of interacting with the world, but some people are falling behind. Across SA, but particularly in regional communities, libraries and community centres perform a vital but under-resourced digital inclusion role: they provide WiFi facilities, computers, printing, digital skills classes, and one-on-one advice and assistance.

This work, explored in 2023 in SACOSS' *'Keys To The Digital World: The Critical Role Of Regional Libraries And Community Centres In Building Digital Inclusion'*¹, is a lifeline for community members struggling to setup and manage their devices, perform basic digital tasks, interact with MyGov, banking, and other services, and for those who have little online access at home. Libraries and community centres have become 'digital jack-of-all-trades', assisting people every day who would otherwise be digitally locked-out. Here are some of their success stories.

Support with safely using your device

A local resident and Age Pensioner in Peterborough had great praise for their local library staff, who regularly assisted them with phone issues, particularly how to avoid and 'screen-out' scam phone calls, a source of considerable frustration.

They noted that whenever they purchased a new phone, usually from the Post Office (there are no telco retailers in town), they would be sent to the library, where the staff would assist with the sometimes lengthy, time-consuming process of phone setup and SIM card registration. Support from the library staff had become even more critical, as they could no longer rely on relatives:

"Previously relied on relatives for tech help, but they now live in Sydney"

Financial independence, personal empowerment

An Age Pensioner, still in part-time work, and who previously had very limited digital skills, spoke about how empowering it was building her digital ability through the classes and mentoring at Southern Yorke Peninsula Community Hub, in Yorketown.

She spoke about the sense of independence that she derived from learning how to do online banking for herself, instead of having to rely on her husband. She also learned how to

¹ Read the full report here:

https://www.sacoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/Keys_To_The_Digital_World_Final_Report.pdf

use a card reader for her small, at-home hairdressing business. It has been a profound turnaround for her:

"I am fairly confident now, but sunk to a real low, before I was using the Hub"

Urgent phone-reset support

An older community member in Edithburgh was frozen-out of their Samsung phone, locking-them out of their apps, and leaving them unable to access their contact phone numbers. It is not hard to appreciate how inconvenient and stressful this predicament would be, especially if this is the only device one uses to access the digital world: being locked-out of your phone means being locked-out of key government portals, and being cut-off from social contacts, and important sources of information.

What would have been a 3-hour drive to the nearest Telstra store in Kadina was avoided, thanks to the assistance of Southern Yorke Peninsula Community Hub, who were able to successfully support the client to reset the password, without losing important apps or contact details.

The benefits of a donated device

A community member on the Disability Support Pension, living in public housing, was fortunate enough to receive a donated PC, via AC Care, and Mount Gambier Community Centre. They previously had a very old laptop, very slow, with webpages taking a very long time to load, and a small screen that caused them huge discomfort, including migraines. They could not afford to replace this device. Their new computer is much faster, allowing them to make quicker progress on their studies. They now feel confident about doing their Centrelink reporting online, something they struggled to do on their previous, very inadequate laptop. And it has a larger screen, increasing their level of physical comfort:

"I get less migraines, now that I have a bigger device, with a bigger screen"

Having a functional computer also means that they are able to do more of their studying, and other digital work at home, instead of always having to head to the library, and book one of their PCs.

Libraries and community centres do vital work, but more work is needed – it is time for the state government to step up

Important work is happening, but many community members, especially in regional SA, still lack the skills to go online, or simply do not have the data or devices they need at home. Libraries and community centres, especially in the regions, are under-the-pump. They need the resources to be able to keep building people's digital skills, along with funding to make new community connections, through mobile and outreach work, and to be able to loan-out devices and data to people who cannot afford data and devices at home.

SACOSS has put together a package of recommendations for the state government to fund, so that no one will be left behind by the digital world. Read more at sacoss.org.au.