SACOSS
South Australian Council of Social Service

# 'Keys to the Digital World'

## Summary of first round of regional travels

---

### Overview – key issues

In this paper, I have included a summary of some of the key issues that emerged from 4 consecutive weeks of regional travel (mid-March to early-April), based on my conversations with members of the public; libraries; community centres; Councils, and other stakeholders.

Here is an overview of what were the most prominent topics:

- There remains considerable stress from community members about feeling pressured or forced to 'go online'.
- These feelings are most intense in the smallest, most isolated, regional communities (i.e., Karoonda, Peterborough), where:
    - There has been a significant loss of face-to-face government and private-sector services.
    - The ability of local organisations – such as small school-community libraries (SCLs) and community centres – to support people to meet their digital needs and 'catch-up' greatly constrained by limited staffing and resources.
- Libraries and community centres are having to be a 'jack-of-all-trades', and provide assistance on a wide range of digital challenges, including matters that arguably are the responsibility of state and federal government departments, banks, and telcos.
- Many Age Pensioners reported struggling with basic phone and device functions, and were deeply fearful of online scams.
- Jobseekers (who tended to be over the age of 50) spoke about difficulties paying for data, and functioning devices, and had varying levels of digital skill.
- Users of digital supports spoke highly of the assistance they received from library and hubs, but wanted drop-in support and classes to be permanent and repeated.
- Many community members who would benefit from some of the existing digital supports were not aware of such services, despite marketing efforts, or hesitant to engage, for a variety of reasons.

### Summary of engagements

A full list of my interviews and meetings over my four weeks of travel has been included elsewhere, but here is a summary of my face-to-face engagements.

I heard from 76 members of the public, including:

- Users of library digital inclusion services
- Users of community centre digital inclusion services
- Individuals who considered themselves to have difficulties interacting with the digital world (largely a mix of Age Pensioners, and JobSeekers)
- Young mothers

Interactions were a mix of formal group/one-on-one interviews, and less formal gatherings.

I heard from 29 people working in a variety of sectors, including libraries; community centres; Councils; welfare sector organisations; and regional bodies; as well as 2 Mayors (Peterborough, and Yorke Peninsula). These engagements included:

- Meetings with 12 library staff, across 7 libraries:
    - Karoonda SCL
    - Peterborough SCL
    - Orroroo SCL
    - Port Pirie
    - Yorketown SCL
    - Kadina
    - Mount Gambier
- Meetings with 4 local Council staff, from:
    - Peterborough Council
    - Yorke Peninsula Council
    - Mount Gambier Council
- Meetings with 5 staff from 4 community centres (2 of which – Southern Yorke Peninsula, and Maitland – provide dedicated digital inclusion services):
    - Peterborough Community Hub
    - Southern Yorke Peninsula Community Hub
    - Maitland Information Centre
    - Mount Gambier Community Centre

## Key themes

**Online interactions with government and private services huge source of frustration – especially in smallest communities where face-to-face services have been withdrawn**

- There has been widespread removal of face-to-face government and private sector service provision and support, i.e., loss of bank branches, Centrelink, Service SA, specialist and retailer telcos.
- There is particular frustration and fear about the loss of bank offices, and the pressures to engage with online banking.
- The lack of telcos in small communities often meant great reliance on SCLs and community centres to assist with phone setup and ongoing support, particularly if the phone was a low-cost purchase.

- This has led to huge strain being placed on the local Post Office, and greater pressure to engage with these services online, or over the phone.
- The ability of local SCLs to play the digital inclusion facilitation role that is expected of them is greatly hampered by very limited staffing, resources, and physical space (see below).
- Welfare workers are spending significant amounts of time assisting clients with very limited digital skills to deal with online government portals.
- Given all these factors, the ability of these communities to digitally catch-up is hugely limited.
- Funding for digital inclusion support services must recognise this. Per-capita funding is unlikely to ever be sufficient to allow these communities to catch-up.

*"You feel helpless, when you are given options that don't help you"* – Age Pensioner, Orroroo.

*"A lot of people wouldn't know how to setup their phone or tablet for Centrelink and My Gov"* – Age Pensioner and part-time worker, Karoonda.

*"Really intimidated by online banking"* – Age Pensioner, Karoonda.

*"Bank SA branch closure was disgusting. Not much warning."* – Age Pensioner, Peterborough.

*"When I buy a new phone, they give you no instructions. Library helps with phone setup."* – Age Pensioner, Peterborough

**Affordability of devices, data, a major issue for job-seekers**

- While most Age Pensioners did not indicate that affordability of data and devices was a concern for them[1], among people on JobSeeker (mostly over the age of 50), who were on a lower income, with higher housing costs, this was a critical issue.
- Jobseekers varied in terms of device ownership: many were phone-only, some had other devices (but little access to data), and some had devices that were too old or dysfunctional to use.
- Jobseekers were often hit with a poverty premium: old, poor-quality devices (generally phones, but sometimes laptops, too), that they could not afford to fix, or replace, plus poor-value data/credit plans.
- Many jobseekers went without credit, or ran out of credit early. There was concern about how much data certain background apps were using (which also speaks to the need for further digital literacy training around how to manage data usage).

- Despite lack of data and devices being a recurring theme for jobseekers, there was great variation, in terms of usage of library and community centre digital offerings:

[1] There were a few Age Pensioners, however, who spoke about being stuck with old devices they could not afford to replace or fix.

    - Most did not use digital offerings (such as free Wi-Fi, computers, or laptops)
    - But there was a minority who used libraries frequently – daily, in some cases – and some who would use the public PCs for the maximum daily amount.

- At least one jobseeker spoke about the huge benefits of the Telstra's phone boxes – which provide free calls and free data – but this was specifically in Mount Gambier, one of SA's largest regional communities, where they were surprisingly common.

*"By the time we've paid off the device, it's already out of date"* – Jobseeker, Mount Gambier, who used a rent-to-buy scheme (Snaffle) to purchase a laptop.

*"This is just the way the world works…I need a laptop for studying, working, for job-searching"* – Jobseeker above.

*"I spend $58 a month on internet, but I can barely afford it"* – Jobseeker, Mount Gambier.

*"The data for a 1-hour, fortnightly, teleheath appointment, can be a huge cost for someone"* – Community worker, Port Pirie.

*"We've got clients who can't afford any credit"* – Community worker, Port Pirie.

**Digital literacy – key challenges, community views on classes and one-on-one support**

- Limited digital confidence and skill was the mostly commonly-raised issue among Age Pensioners (and was a common issue among older jobseekers).
- Some of the most common digital-literacy issues raised were:
    - Basic phone functions:
        - Phone setup
        - Browsing online
        - Saving phone numbers
        - Checking voicemail messages
        - Finding files, and transferring them to other devices
    - Setting up an e-mail address
    - Internet banking
    - Staying safe from online scams, including scam calls, SMSes, and e-mails
    - Using Centrelink and My Gov online (both the website, and the app)

- A majority of the older people I spoke to had only one device – their mobile phone – in some interview groups, this was overwhelmingly the case.
- People who were doing, or who had done, a digital skills class, appeared to be more likely to have other devices, like IPads, laptops, and tablets.
- In some communities, older men were heavily reliant on their wives to do the 'secretarial work' of the household, meaning they had very little digital skill, but in

other cases, this dynamic was reversed, and wives relied on their husbands, who handled all the finance and admin work, putting the wives in a vulnerable position.

*"Husband is very reluctant to use phone, very wary, he doesn't want to know how"* – Age Pensioner above.

*"Have a lot of elderly customers, but they don't know how to use their phones, don't know how to connect to free Wi-Fi, don't even know what it is"* – Age Pensioner above.

*"Have a computer, haven't used it for 5 years, too hard"* – Age Pensioner, Peterborough.

*"Purchased a laptop 10 years, by the time I learned how to use it, it was beyond repair"* – Age Pensioner, Peterborough.

*"It's hard to keep in touch with tech, once you're retired"* – Age Pensioner, Karoonda.

*"It's harder as you get older, we still want to learn things, but things keep changing"* – Age Pensioner, Maitland.

<u>Views on digital classes and drop-in support</u>

- Among community members (largely Age Pensioners) who had taken digital classes at libraries and community hubs, feedback was very positive.
- People spoke about the confidence and freedom that came from learning new skills, but the social benefits of group classes and training were also highlighted by some participants.
- Online security, fear of scams, were key motivations, but for some, it was more foundational: they simply wanted to learn how to setup and use the device they had purchased.
- Participants in computer and phone classes emphasised the need for support to be ongoing, and repeated, as new skills were easy to forget, and needed regular reinforcement and review.
- There were also frequent comments about the speed of classes, and what skill level they were pitched at.

- Some of the most significant digital inclusion success stories included:
    - An older woman in Mount Gambier who previously had never used a computer, but through her library's classes, went on to publish online her own cooking book.
    - An older woman on the Yorke Peninsula who learned how to do online banking for herself (instead of having to rely on her husband) and how to use a card reader for her at-home hairdressing business, a hugely empowering experience for her.
    - An older man in Orroroo whose digital classes gave him the confidence and skill to start digitising the full of catalogue of Orroroo Historical Society.

- Among people who were digitally-excluded, there tended to be a preference for drop-in or one-on-one digital support, because of:
    - Convenience.
    - More tailored support – classes not always relevant to people's needs and interests, can be too advanced or fast, or not pitched at the right level.
    - One-on-one assistance gave people more privacy – particularly if they felt embarrassed about their low level of digital skill – than group classes.

*"He never makes you feel like a dill, and he doesn't do it for you, he helps you learn something for yourself"* – Age Pensioner, Mount Gambier, commenting on the instructor for the digital skills classes run by their library.

*"I am fairly confident now, but sunk to a real low, before I was using the [computer classes at] the Hub"* – Age Pensioner in part-time work, referring to the computer classes offered by Southern Yorke Peninsula Community Hub, Yorketown.

*"It's not just about digital inclusion, it's also the social connection"* – Digital inclusion worker, Kadina.

*"My son got me started, but once I got started, I got everything else from Kate [manager of Southern Yorke Peninsula Community Hub"]* – Age Pensioner, Yorketown.

*"We need the classes to keep going"* – Age Pensioner, on the digital skills classes run by Southern Yorke Peninsula Community Hub, Yorketown.

*"Would disadvantage the whole community, in lots of different ways, if classes were cut."* – Age Pensioner, Mount Gambier.

*"It was hard to keep up [with the computer class]"* – Age Pensioner, Maitland.

*"Too hard to remember everything"* – Jobseeker, Mount Gambier.

*"Took computer classes, a few years ago, but there was no follow-up"* – Age Pensioner, Peterborough.

*"Don't always grasp things straightaway, second time would have been good"* – Age Pensioner, Karoonda.

*"We need someone in town who can provide help, show people how, one-on-one"* – Age Pensioner, Peterborough.

**Capacity remains a huge issue for SCLs**

- Limited staffing was a universal theme among SCLs, where, for most of the week, there is only one staff member at a time, in a public-facing role, and with staff already enduring significant workloads, aside from their digital inclusion roles.

- Not only was providing one-on-one digital support often straining, but running separate classes was not practical, unless there was a second librarian rostered on during that time.

*"We need an external person to come in [and run classes]"* – School-community librarian.

*"I'm here by myself, the majority of the time"* – School-community librarian.

*"2 staff members at a time would allow us to run classes, but then, we would still need the space"* – School and community librarian

**Public visibility and profile, lack of suitable physical space, also key factors**

- Despite strong marketing efforts, awareness of library and community centre digital offerings was sometimes quite patchy, among those who would be benefit from digital support.
- SCLs faced a particular challenge: that the community library was located *within* the school grounds, and its location was not always obvious, from the main street.
    - One SCL that bucked this trend was Orroroo, which had very prominent signage and main road frontage.
- Some residents commented that they were not sure of the location of their SCL, and for others (particularly men), having to walk through the school grounds, to reach the library, appeared to be a deterrent.
- In some locations (Maitland and Yorketown), there was very strong awareness of the digital offerings at the local community hub, but libraries were more associated with their traditional, non-digital functions.
- Limited physical space was a major obstacle for Peterborough SCL, there was nowhere in the library to hold classes, even if there were staff available to run them.

*"I did not know the library had computer classes"* – Disability Support Pensioner, Mount Gambier.

*"Didn't realise they could help with phone issues"* – Age Pensioner, Peterborough.

*"Would love to take the service out there [to communities]"* – Digital inclusion worker, Kadina, on the need for outreach work.

**Other potential barriers to take-up of library and other digital inclusion supports**

- Where there were digitally-excluded community members who were not engaging with library digital inclusion, the following additional reasons were identified as potential factors:
    - Social anxiety, particularly if it is a larger, more active library (i.e., a standalone regional library, e.g., Kadina's, or Port Pirie's).
    - Lack of privacy – computers tend to be in public places (for sensible reasons), but anyone needing to use computers for confidential or private matters may be deterred by this.

- Lack of relationships – some people who are not already connected with their library would find it daunting to engage with a new institution.
- In larger regional communities, or for people living in rural and remote areas, well away from the nearest township, transport could be an issue.
- Poor written literacy – people who are illiterate/have limited literacy might find libraries to be an intimidating, alienating environment.
- For parents of infants, or very young children, libraries were not seen as ideal spaces – more convenient for them would be a park or a playground, with good, free WiFi.
- Immunocompromised people, given the continuing, high transmission of COVID, may be hesitant to engage with any face-to-face institutions

*"It's just not a place they [their clients] would go, it's very modern, very busy, very large"* – Community worker, regional SA, commenting on a larger regional library.

*"You feel out of place there"* – Disability Support Pensioner, Peterborough.

*"People fear looking stupid, shown for not having IT skills"* – Age Pensioner, Yorketown.

*"Even after 4 years, hard to know where the library is"* – Age Pensioner, Karoonda, who is fairly active in the local community.

## Possible next steps for engagement

**Ongoing online engagement with regional libraries and community centres**

- Will be working with Public Library Services and Community Centres SA to hold one-on-one and group interviews with regional library and community centre staff – particularly SCL staff – from select locations.

**Further online and phone interviews with users of digital supports provided by regional libraries and community centres**

- Will use my existing relationships with regional libraries and community centres to continue to speak to users of digital supports about their experiences.

**Further engagement with job-seekers**

- Want to further explore how regional job-seekers are coping with the costs of data and devices, and what ways libraries and community centres could further engage this group. Red Cross in Port Pirie and Job Agencies in Peterborough are keen to assist with this engagement.

**Further engagement with Aboriginal communities**

- Had some engagement with Aboriginal people – had a group interview with staff and a client at Pangula, in Mount Gambier – but need for further consultation, either a return trip to Mount Gambier, or a visit to Point Pearce – have built a strong relationship with the Closing the Gap Coordinator in Maitland, which would help facilitate this.