Submission into the NSW Digital Inclusion Strategy Discussion Paper

AUGUST 2024

COTA
for older Australians
New South Wales

About COTA NSW

Council on the Ageing (COTA) NSW is the leading not-for-profit organisation representing the rights and interests of people over 50 in NSW. We're an independent, consumer-based, non-government organisation.

We are determined to ensure that older people's contributions to society are valued and that they have access to the opportunities other members of the community take for granted. We work with politicians, policymakers, service providers, and the media to ensure that older people's views are heard and acted on.

Stakeholder Engagement

Design of the stakeholder engagement process by the Digital Inclusion Strategy Team has precluded those who are digitally excluded from participation.

Providing submissions and feedback on the Digital Inclusion Strategy Discussion Paper was made difficult for the digitally excluded. A submission process was carried out via the NSW Government's 'Have Your Say' website. All avenues to provide feedback had to be accessed digitally. In particular:

- No telephone number was provided to contact the Digital Inclusion Strategy Team. This meant that if a digitally excluded person wanted to participate in processes such as joining a focus group, they would not have been able to register.
- The avenues to provide the submission were limited to digital methods. This meant that if you wanted to make a submission, you could not call someone and make a submission over the phone or mail a written submission.

This can be contrasted with other submission processes on the 'Have Your Say' website that include names and telephone numbers of people in the 'who is listening' section. They also provide multiple means of providing submissions such as by phone, mail or online.

While we understand that approximately 85 highly digitally excluded people have been engaged through a third-party organisation, this does not replace an inclusive 'Have Your Say' process.

When engaging through the generic mailbox, the replies received were signed off as follows:

Kind regards,
Digital Inclusion Strategy Team

No telephone number has been provided in the signature block nor the name of the person providing the correspondence. Again, this is not best practice and for someone who is somewhat digitally excluded but has been able to email. The person is kept within the digital space despite the fact that telephoning or other means of communication may be better suited to them despite having taken the first step via email.

Recommendation One
The NSW Telco Authority, as the leading government organisation for digital inclusion, review its stakeholder engagement and general communication protocols to ensure they are inclusive of all people, including those who are digitally excluded.

Recommendation Two
Formal guidelines be developed to be implemented throughout all NSW government agencies, providing processes to ensure that all consultations processes and general communications are as accessible by both

The Digital Inclusion Strategy Discussion Paper was created without engagement with non-government organisations

It is disappointing that, with the introduction of a new government strategy, consultation with non-government organisations was not undertaken prior to developing the Digital Inclusion Strategy Discussion Paper.

The Digital Inclusion Strategy Discussion Paper has set up the process to be exclusionary. The Strategy assumes that it is possible for everyone to be digitally included. When explaining what a Digital Inclusions Strategy could look like, the Digital Inclusions Strategy Discussion Paper states that:

> "A NSW Digital Inclusion Strategy would seek to…establish a strategic framework that ensures equitable digital access and participation for everyone in the state and enables collaborative partnerships for the delivery of programs and initiatives."

The Digital Inclusion Strategy Discussion Paper goes on to pose the following question to submission makers:

> "How can we collaborate to make digital inclusion a reality for everyone in NSW?"

It is impossible to ensure equitable digital access and participation for everyone, and no amount of collaboration can make digital inclusion a reality for everyone in NSW. The Discussion Paper leaves no room for discussion of the needs of those who will inevitably remain digitally excluded.

While well-meaning, the constant focus on digital inclusion will ensure that those who are digitally excluded will remain invisible and vulnerable. Instead, any Digital Inclusion Strategy must be framed to give equal weight to supporting people to become digitally included as well as recognising that some of the most vulnerable people in NSW will remain digitally excluded.

COTA NSW submits that stakeholder engagement should have been undertaken to help shape the discussion paper. By doing so, the exclusionary nature of the discussion paper could have been avoided, which will inevitably skew the feedback given.

Recommendation Three
The Digital Inclusion Strategy recognise that not all residents of NSW can become digitally included and many of our most vulnerable residents will remain digitally excluded.

Recommendation Four
Provide well-funded support for the proportion of the population that will inevitably remain digitally excluded and ensure that systems are in place to ensure ongoing access to information and services for the digitally excluded.

Barriers to digital inclusion

Setting the scene of the digital profile of older people

To understand the barriers to digital inclusion of older NSW residents, it is important to understand their digital profiles.

74% of Australians aged over the age of 70 were categorised as digitally disengaged.[1]

Almost two thirds of those older people who are digitally excluded had a personal income of less than $21 000.[2]

Mobile phones (78%) and tablets (59%) are the most common devices used by older people to access the internet.[3]

7% of older Australians do not have access to internet in their homes.[4]

When it comes to the attitudes of older people to the digital world[5],

- 80% of older people find technology is changing so fast that it is difficult to keep up with.
- 67% indicated that they were worried about the invasion of their privacy.
- 28% of older people said they would go out of their way to learn everything they can about technology.
- 34% of older people feel that computers and technology give them more control over their lives.

Many older people don't want to go online to get information and alternatives should remain.

Many older people do not want to go online to receive information.

COTA NSW recently undertook comprehensive research on how older people in NSW access information. A focus group participant noted:[6]

"Most of the people I know that are in the older age bracket, and are accessing government [supports and services], they don't have the internet. Why is it that everybody expects that everybody has, first of all, a mobile phone? I find that myself, I don't want to go online. I want to actually speak to a person because that way, I'm confident in what I'm doing."

Often, we see service providers, including government at all levels, pushing people to a single choice of accessing information: the digital space. Even with a telephone conversation they are often simply told to go online.

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[1] Office of the eSafety Commissioner (May 2018) *Understanding the digital behaviours of older Australians. Summary of national survey and qualitative research.* https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-08/Understanding-digital-behaviours-older-Australians-summary-report-2018.pdf
[2] Ibid.
[3] Australian Communications and Media Authority (May 2021). *Communications and media in Australia. The digital lives of older Australians.* https://www.acma.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-05/The%20digital%20lives%20of%20older%20Australians.pdf
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

This is a concerning trend given that the top four information categories being sought by older people are[7]:

- health care
- government pensions and concessions
- community and/or aged care
- financial services

By limiting the ways in which information is provided older people are at risk of not being able to access critical information they require to make important decisions.

Recommendation Five
Recognition be given that many older people, including those who are digitally included, may have a preference to access information in person or by phone and that processes must remain and be enhanced to allow that preference.

Barriers to digital inclusion for those with internet and device access

Our experience at COTA NSW indicates two main areas where digital exclusion occurs for people with internet access and devices to access the internet.

The first situation is where older people are trying to access information. Finding information online is overwhelming and finding the correct information pertinent to the issue at hand can be difficult.

The second situation is where there has been a change on the software, website or app they use to access the internet. While previously they have been able to navigate and access the digital space this change now stops that. No amount of training can help avoid these situations. Instead we try to troubleshoot the issue.

Priorities for NSW Government

Adequately funded programs to ensure that older NSW residents have the right support to become digitally included.

For a digital inclusion program to work, it must be well funded and fit for purpose, targeting the barriers to digital inclusion. While we applaud the government for funding current projects to help with digital inclusion for older people, it is clear that these programs are not designed for maximum impact.

The NSW *Government* funds the Tech Savvy Seniors Program. The funding is for a maximum of $40 000 a year and is provided for a single year only. The eligibility criteria requires applicants to be either a NSW approved Adult and Community Education provider or a public library.

The program is limited to providing training programs and recipients are funded on the basis of training places. From both our experiences at COTA NSW and from research[8], we know that older people are seeking one on one training. Key to this is not simply to provide general training but to have available ongoing support wherepeople can take their own devices and work through problems they are facing.

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Betts, L. R., Hill, R., & Gardner, S. E. (2017). "There's Not Enough Knowledge Out There": Examining Older Adults' Perceptions of Digital Technology Use and Digital Inclusion Classes. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0733464817737621

Recommendation Six
Funding should be provided as a priority for a broader range of activities to support older people's digital inclusion. The funding should be available to a wide range of organisations and cover both initial training and ongoing support on a face-to-face, one-on-one basis.

Equipment and internet access

As outlined above, two-thirds of older people who are digitally excluded have a personal income of less than $21,000 per year. Thus, it is clear that providing free internet access and devices to older people on lower incomes is a priority area of concern.

Recommendation Seven
Internet access and devices should be free or heavily subsidised for people who hold a Commonwealth-issued Pension Concession Card, Healthcare Card, or Seniors Healthcare Card.

Systems and processes that force digital exclusion

System and processes can be poorly thought and cause digital exclusion even for the most savvy internet users. Below is a series of images to illustrate how introduction of a digital payment system has created digital exclusions. The phots are of parking at Concord General Repatriation Hospital. People visiting hospitals are already stressed and digital exclusion should not exacerbate this.

The first is of the sign that simply says 'Ticket Phone'. No other information is provided on how to purchase a ticket and people trying to pay were visibly confused. The second is of a sign that provides some detail on how to pay, although still very difficult to navigate. The third and fourth images show no parking pay machines in sight.

It should be noted that pay machines for parking tickets were available (although quite distant). Stating this on signs would have made the process much easier and accessible for all.

Recommendation Eight
Clear thought be given when developing systems and processes to ensure that digital access is possible within the system and that consumers are made aware of alternatives to digital access of information or services.

Further Information

For further information on this submission, please contact:
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