



**Royal Commission
into Natural Disaster
Arrangements**

Good Things Foundation Australia Submission
April 2020



Good Things
Foundation Australia

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Introduction

The recent bushfire crisis highlighted digital inclusion as an issue for all Australians. Many people were reportedly cut off from digital communications channels and up-to-date emergency information in a dangerous and rapidly changing situation. This highlighted the need for everyone in our nation to have the digital ability and access they need to stay well informed and connected.

While digital connectivity was a major concern during the recent bushfires and recovery process [as documented by ACCAN](#), with [some areas still not fully connected](#), this submission will focus on the need for people to have the digital skills and confidence they need to find reliable information online in an emergency and connect with friends, family, community and essential recovery services.

Good Things Foundation believes that building digitally resilient communities will assist in creating more disaster-resilient communities too, and Governments can work with community organisations and telecommunications service providers on solutions.

Good Things Foundation Australia thanks the Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements for the opportunity to make this submission, following the 2019-2020 bushfire crisis.

Digital Inclusion in Australia

2.5 million Australians are not online¹ and an estimated 4 million people have limited digital skills and interest². In regional areas, where bushfires were more active in the past season, rates of digital inclusion are significantly lower than in metro areas. According to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), digital ability scores in rural areas are 10.2 points lower than in capital cities.³ [See Digital Nation Australia 2020 resource.](#)

Being digitally excluded means not having the access or ability to connect safely and confidently to the internet in an affordable way. The ADII identifies the people across Australia who are more likely to experience digital exclusion as being:

- People on lower incomes
- People with lower levels of education
- Indigenous Australians
- People who have a mobile-only connection
- Older Australians
- People with disability
- People out of the workforce
- People living in rural areas

Some of these factors may already lead to an increased vulnerability in natural disasters, even before the digital divide is considered.

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP) describe digital technologies as having provided an opportunity to build resilience and deepen connectivity in disaster prone areas, but that a community being digitally included is a requirement to see the full benefit.

Industry 4.0 technologies need to build disaster resilience of the poorest and most excluded. For this purpose, it is vital to close the remaining digital divide by ensuring universal and affordable high-velocity internet access and adapting people's skills to new demands. Advances in computational capabilities and communications seem likely to increase our ability to model and assess risk. But this does not automatically assure smart resilience for all. Results need to be

¹ Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019*, RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra

² Borg, K & Smith, L, Monash University, Monash Sustainability Institute, BehaviourWorks Australia, *Digital Inclusion. Report of Online Behaviours in Australia 2016* Prepared for Australia Post

³ Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019*, RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra

*communicated in ways that promote effective action and allow people to benefit from this rich new source of information and knowledge.*⁴

People who are digitally included are better able to access online information and services. Until the digital divide is closed in Australia, there will be a case for maintaining non-digital communications and support channels throughout emergency situations, including face-to-face and telephone-based support for community members.

More research is needed in this area to understand the interdependency of digital inclusion and disaster-readiness in the Australian local community context and how Governments and local communities can respond.

Bushfires & natural disasters impact local digital inclusion initiatives

Good Things Foundation is an international leader in supporting digital inclusion. Core to our model is a network of hyper-local community organisations alongside high-quality online learning materials. In Australia, we have built and support the Be Connected Network - a network of 3,000 community organisations that deliver in-person, tailored and relevant digital skills programs to people in their community. Organisations in our Network are diverse and include community centres, libraries, local Councils, Men's Sheds, aged care and retirement villages, multicultural seniors groups, and disability and employment services.

In the first two years of the Australian Government funded Be Connected program, the Network supported over 250,000 people to improve their digital literacy. This program is a blended learning approach - using digital tools and in person support to motivate and encourage people to improve their digital capability. The digital mentors delivering the support and the community organisations in the Network are trusted members of the community, and a big reason as to why this program approach works.

- [Read more about the first two years of the Be Connected program.](#)
- [See stories from the Network here.](#)

225 of our Network Partners are located in the 43 local councils that were eligible for bushfire assistance offered in January by the Federal government. From our contact with them during the immediate bushfire recovery period, we understand that:

- 40% of those organisations' digital skills service provision, staff or clientele were impacted by the bushfires, with several postponing or changing their service

⁴ Salsiah Alisjahbana, A, Zahedi, K, Bonapace, T, *The Disaster Riskscape Across Asia-Pacific: Pathways for resilience, inclusion and empowerment, Asia Pacific Disaster Report 2019*, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), p 102.

offering to meet their organisations and communities needs while recovering from the disaster event.

- For some organisations and communities, the impacts of the bushfires on demand for and provision of their digital skills and support programs is ongoing.

Community organisations in the Network also act as emergency meeting points or evacuation centres for their communities and have roles greater than digital skills provision in the recovery and support effort, such as social or health support. Some organisations in the Network, such as libraries and community centres can be the place where community members access digital devices and the internet if they do not have this access at home. This has been evidenced by our recent survey during the Coronavirus pandemic, where 75% of the Network had learners who did not have digital devices at home they can use. If people are cut off from this access due to natural disasters, digital access levels in the community will decline from their usual levels.

Many more organisations in our Network have supported their community through other natural disasters including floods, cyclones and drought, all of which would impact the needs of their communities for different types of digital support. For example, individuals may need to fill in online forms to access drought relief or government support.

As natural disasters have this impact on local digital inclusion service provision, digital readiness support needs to be provided in advance to prepare a community, as well as during and following the event.

Resources to support digital preparedness of communities for natural disasters

Government's have a role in ensuring digital preparedness and resilience of communities for natural disasters, including (but not limited to):

- Digital skills to use emergency apps, access current and reliable information online, maintain contact with friends, family and emergency services
- Internet and phone connectivity in a natural disaster, including in blackouts
- Access to connected devices when cut off from regular access channels

Apps such as Fires Near Me are an important communication tool for our emergency services. If people don't know how to download and use an app, and in particular have familiarity with this app, they cannot access this information in the same ways as someone who is digitally included.

The Federal Government has invested in boosting digital skills across the country through the Be Connected program, but so far the funding has only been directed at

older Australians (over 50's) and basic digital skills. More people across a broader range of demographics need access to support that specifically focuses on emergency digital-preparedness.

At Good Things Foundation, we recognised a gap in resources available to teach people how to use digital in an emergency. In response, we created and distributed [resources for community organisations](#) to improve their communities emergency digital skills, in the form of session plans and tipsheets for digital literacy classes on:

- Finding reliable information online in a bushfire emergency
- Using Facebook to keep updated during a bushfire
- Using the internet to find reliable information during an emergency
- Using apps to monitor bushfires near you

These four resources published in early March focus on building skills and digital-preparedness of community members for bushfires and have been downloaded 250+ times. In particular, they look at how learners can avoid misinformation, access reliable government information services and use apps to monitor bushfires. We supported the release of these resources with webinars for digital mentors, which were well received.

A small number of organisations in our Network in previous bushfire-impacted communities have already undertaken digital support sessions on emergency preparedness for their community as part of Good Things Foundation's annual Get Online Week digital inclusion campaign. Some have also provided digital skills support in drought-affected areas.

However, we need to do more to ensure communities across the board are digital-ready and skilled for future natural disaster events.

Dedicated funding, program and learning resources need to be developed to support existing, trusted digital mentors at community organisations. These resources need to support communities to be digitally skilled in:

- Access - Staying connected to the internet and information services during an emergency (including offline communications channels)
- Capability - how to use the relevant emergency apps and websites, streaming local radio or news coverage, how to find reliable information and identify misinformation online, connecting with family, friends, community and information services, and access recovery services online (eg Government relief funding, mental health services)
- Resilience - being able to digitally adapt and respond to changing situations and technological solutions as they happen.

This support is required for natural disasters beyond bushfires, such as floods, drought and cyclones. Additionally, with the prevalence of natural disasters in Australia, this support is needed across the country. As emergency services are largely managed at a state level, and local community environment, connectivity and need varies across the country, this information and support will have to be tailored and relevant to context.

Governments at the Federal, State and Local level need to work cooperatively with emergency services, community digital skills service providers and telecommunications infrastructure and services providers to ensure our communities have the support and resources they need to be more digitally-resilient and prepared for future bushfires and natural disasters.

Recommendations

Improving digital inclusion builds stronger, more connected communities and may improve preparedness for natural disasters such as the 2019-20 bushfire season.

Good Things Foundation Australia recommends:

1. Community organisations are recognised as trusted sources of digital literacy support for the community, whose service provision can be impacted by natural disasters
2. With appropriate support, resources and funding, community organisations are well positioned to deliver locally relevant digital skills support that improves the capacity of people in their community to digitally-prepare for and respond to natural disasters
3. Government at a Federal, State and Local level and their agencies need to work cooperatively with community organisations to fund and deliver this support in advance of natural disasters
4. While we work to close the digital divide, and in case of connectivity failures in a natural disaster, offline communications channels remain an important feature of emergency communications
5. More research is needed in Australia on the link between digital inclusion, disaster preparedness and community resilience.

About Good Things Foundation Australia

Good Things Foundation Australia is a social change charity, helping people to improve their lives through digital. We work with partners in thousands of communities across Australia, the UK and Kenya.

In Australia, we have built and manage the Australian Government funded [Be Connected Network](#) of 3,000 community partners and deliver the \$20 million grants

program to support people over 50 to learn essential digital skills. We coordinate the digital inclusion campaign [Get Online Week](#) which last year supported 26,000 people to get more out of life online. With the support of the Australian Digital Health Agency and our network of community organisations, we are assisting adults of all ages to improve their digital health literacy through our [Health My Way](#) program.

Good Things Foundation has run digital inclusion projects in the UK for over ten years through the 5,000 strong Online Centres Network and worked in Australia since 2017.

Learn more about our work:

- Good Things Foundation Australia website: www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au
- [Information about our projects](#)
- [Our research and publications](#)
- [Our work in the UK](#)

Contact us

Please do not hesitate to contact us should you require further information on the above recommendations.

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