

Reinventing digital literacy support in a crisis

The impact of COVID-19 on community-based digital inclusion programs

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact across all of Australian society. With social distancing policies enacted across the country, the crisis is highlighting now more than ever why it is essential for people to have basic digital skills. But with the closure of physical premises for many community organisations, how have they supported people at risk of digital exclusion in this 'new normal'?

Digital inclusion means ensuring people can use the internet and technology to improve their daily lives. People need to have access to affordable, internet connected devices and the skills and confidence to use them in order to be digitally included. Those most likely to be at risk of digital exclusion in Australia include older people, people on low incomes or with low levels of education, people living in regional or remote areas, indigenous Australians and those out of the workforce. [See our Digital Nation Australia 2020 resource](#) for information about who is most at risk of being left behind.

Recent [research from the eSafety Commissioner](#) shows that Australian adults increased their internet usage during the first COVID-19 lockdown and saw it as essential for paying bills, accessing news and information, staying in touch with loved ones, working and entertainment. The pandemic has seen a rapid digitisation of many workplaces and services. But [2.5 million Australians are not online](#). And according to the eSafety research, of those who are, only 33% are very confident that they have the skills and access to information they need to feel safe online.

The [Be Connected program](#) was set up by the Australian Government to increase the digital skills and confidence of older Australians and has helped hundreds of thousands of people in less than three years through a blended face-to-face and online delivery model. Good Things Foundation Australia built, supports and manages the national digital inclusion network of over 3,000 community organisations who provide free digital mentoring support to people over 50 through this program (see map, p 3). Called the Be Connected Network, this is a diverse group of organisations including libraries, community centres, men's sheds, CALD community groups and aged care or retirement villages, located across all Australian states and territories.

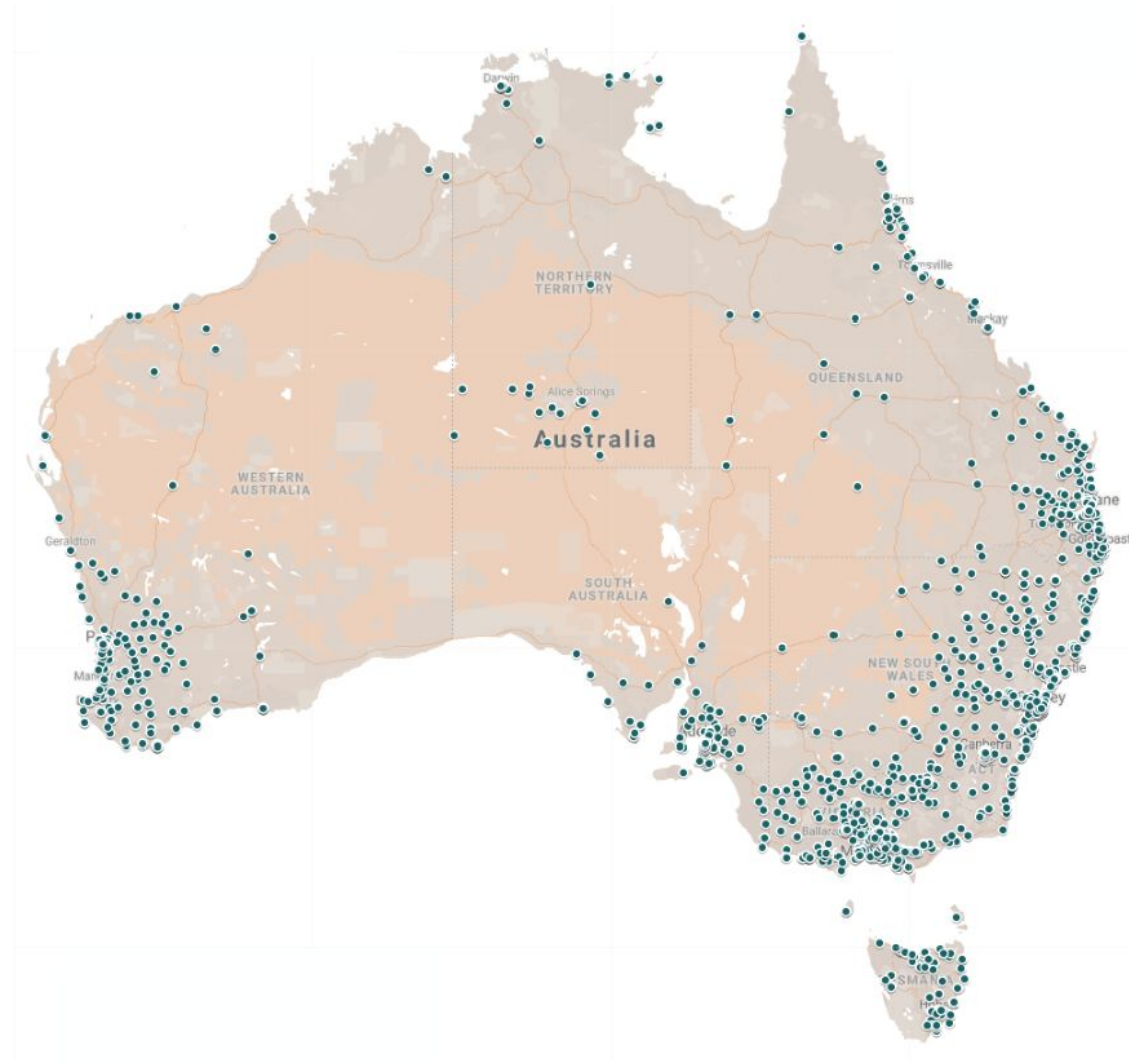
From 2019 members of the Network also began delivering the [Health My Way](#) digital health literacy project to their communities, and participated in our national digital inclusion campaign, [Get Online Week](#), since 2018.

The face-to-face model has been used very successfully to deliver digital skills programs in community settings through these programs, with [research showing](#) that this is the preferred way to learn for 70% of older Australians with low digital skills. However, most organisations in the Network had to temporarily close face-to-face digital skills support programs due to the Coronavirus response, and the Victorian Network have now returned to a second lockdown period, suspending face-to-face and group programs again.

In addition, while COVID-19 has presented a big motivator for people to get online, it is possible that it has actually widened the digital divide due to its potential negative impact on confidence and concerns about online safety, reduced access due to regular sites of wifi and devices closing their doors, and with many new people out of work, reduced incomes and affordability of telecommunications.

This leaves the question: how can we support people facing digital exclusion to connect with friends and family, access essential services, stay safe and apply for work online when they most need it when existing support models are disrupted? And, how can we support organisations and communities to recover and be more digitally skilled and resilient than before?

This report contains the results and insights from Good Things Foundation's research and engagement with the Be Connected Network and learners during the COVID-19 pandemic: March - August 2020.



Good Things Foundation's Be Connected Network is both national and local in reach. 3,000 organisations are in the Network across the country.

Impact stories

Gawler Care & Share, South Australia

For years, Jill Girdham used a mobile phone to access the internet, often running out of data every month. Her husband has a laptop with a wifi dongle, but she's unsure how to use it without his assistance. Jill has realised she needs to get up to speed with technology as her husband's health declines.

Gawler Care & Share received a Be Connected digital devices grant to loan tablets out to the Gawler community. After some support from the centre, Jill is now teaching herself how to use the tablet at home. She says, "It definitely helped to have a mobile phone before I received the tablet. Now, I can use Youtube, Spotify, Facebook (so much easier to see), Gmail, and messenger. I also love all the photos on Australia All Over – so much better to see on the tablet."

It's also allowing her to keep in touch with family and friends.

"Video messenger on Facebook has been great and I found my niece in England and was able to connect with her and talk. I have connected with my brother in Flinders Hospital, too."

"It's a fantastic idea for us oldies. It just lifts the spirits. So good to connect visually with others and since it's free we can connect as long as we like."



Listening and responding to our community

Multiple community consultation initiatives were conducted by Good Things Foundation between March and August 2020 to gauge the impact of the shutdowns and restrictions on the Be Connected program's ability to provide digital skills support, inform our advocacy and design and tailor our support for the Network.

An online COVID-19 Impact survey for Network Partners was conducted June - mid July 2020. Prior to the COVID-19 Impact survey, Good Things Foundation also conducted one-on-one interviews with Network Partners and three mini surveys during the shutdown period in addition to our regular, scheduled feedback processes so we could understand the impact of COVID-19 and tailor our supports. The results from this series of community consultations are supplemented by the collection of Network stories from this time period and insights from Network skillshares, webinars and Online Network Partner Meetup events (illustrated p 7). Feedback from all sources are reflected in this report.

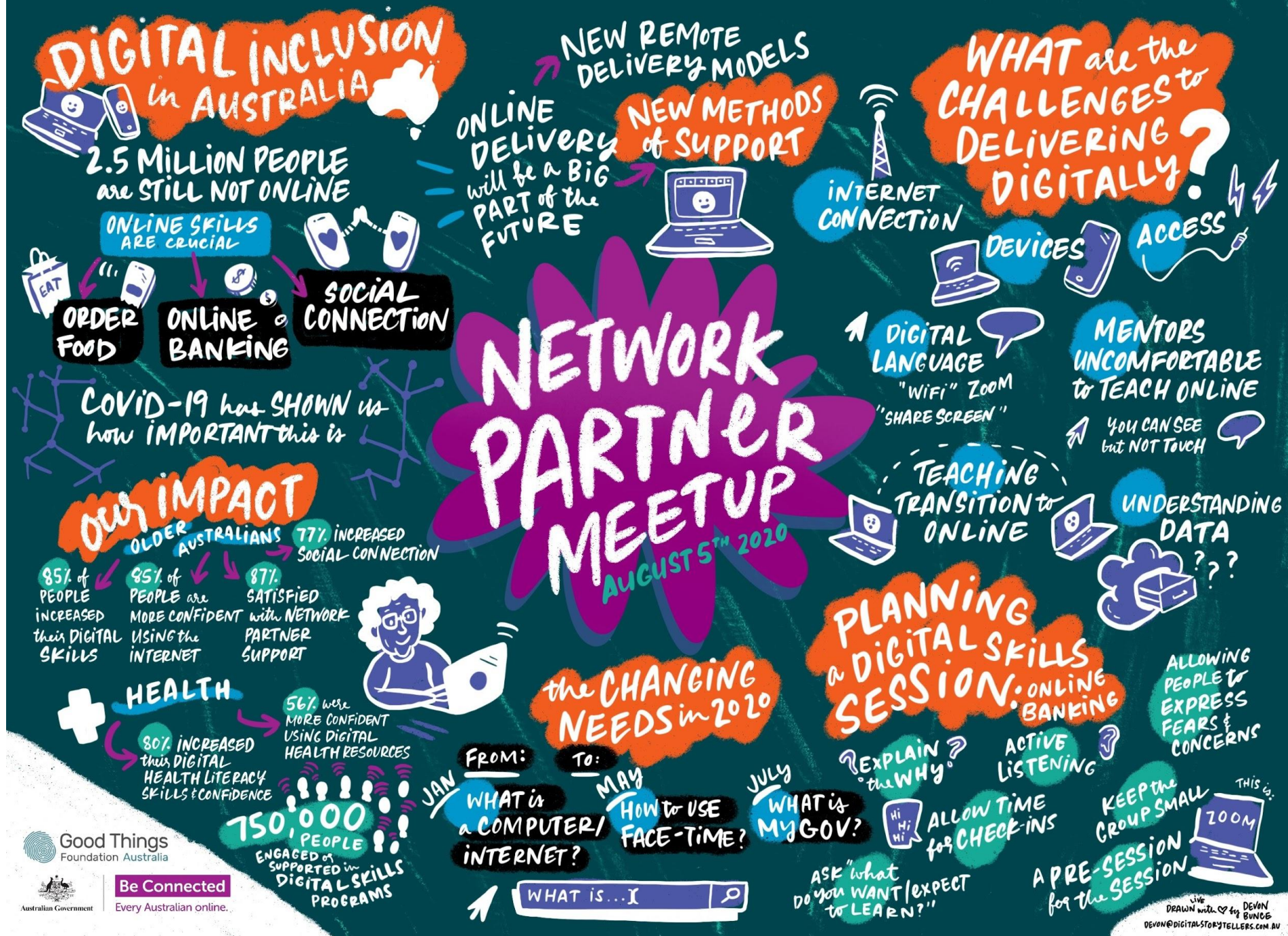
In addition to our community consultation with organisations in the Be Connected Network, we also reached out to existing Be Connected learners through an online survey in July to assess how comfortable they felt returning to face to face learning sessions. This survey covered the time where Stage 3 restrictions were announced for Greater Melbourne & Mitchell Shire and included people from all states and territories. However, due to the relatively small sample size and it's online-only nature, this survey should be considered as an indication into overall learner sentiment only.

Many outcomes from the listening process have already been responded to and implemented. During the pandemic, Good Things Foundation has increased our support activities while ourselves shifting to working remotely from home. Feedback from the Network was acted on in real-time, and serves a backdrop to the findings of this report. Actions we have undertaken are highlighted in the 'Our response' sections of this report.

Our response:

Between March and August 2020, Good Things Foundation Australia:

- Adapted our grant funding for community organisations, such as by introducing a new Digital Devices grant through the Be Connected program applying grant extensions, and allowing modification for online delivery of programs.
- Hosted regular webinars, skillshares and online meetups for digital mentors and published stories and case studies to share best practice and learnings of transitioning to remote delivery models.
- Created and distributed new resources, upskilling the Network on delivering digital skills support remotely, hosting online and COVID-Safe digital skills events, and ensuring digital mentors have resources that support people to find accurate health information online about COVID-19 and access essential services.
- Listened to our Network's needs through community consultation and research initiatives and rapidly adapted our support to respond in real-time.
- Advocated for economic support of the community sector, for digital skills support services and access to devices and data to ensure people do not get left behind or more isolated at this time.
- Raised awareness of the importance of digital skills during the current crisis and how people can get support during this time, including speaking on radio and television ourselves, highlighting the voices of our Network Partners in the media and by introducing a digital marketing campaign to encourage friends and families of older Australians to support them to improve their digital capability.
- Adapted our approach to our digital inclusion campaign Get Online Week, being held in late October.



Above: Illustrated outcomes from an Online Network Partner Meetup event held 5 August 2020, including feedback recorded from the Network showing the impact of COVID-19 and success of existing delivery models.

Impact on delivery models

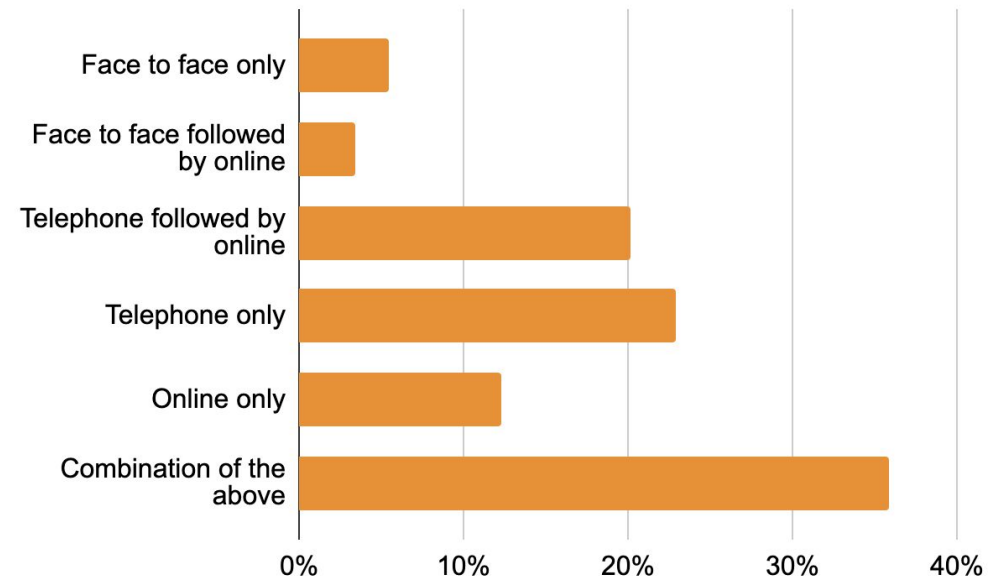
There was a significant impact on digital skills program delivery models used by Network Partners during national COVID-19 shutdowns, and this impact continues as recovery processes unfold in many states.

In April, **50%** of Network survey respondents said that they had either started or were planning to start delivering programs online. By July, **73%** of COVID-19 Impact survey respondents stated that they were able to deliver some form of digital skills support during COVID-19 lockdowns. Largely this was a limited offer compared to their usual support service.

Mechanisms used to do this delivery were most commonly a combination of online delivery and telephone-based models depending on the learner and the capacity of the digital mentors and the organisation. Telephone-based support at a total of **43%** of those delivering support emerged as a key enabler of remote or online digital skills programs.

Between the face-to-face & online, telephone & online, and 'Other' category of which over half reported a including online delivery, **55%** of delivery models had an online element. As expected with the closure of community organisations doors, face-to-face support, the usual mechanism for service delivery, dropped off.

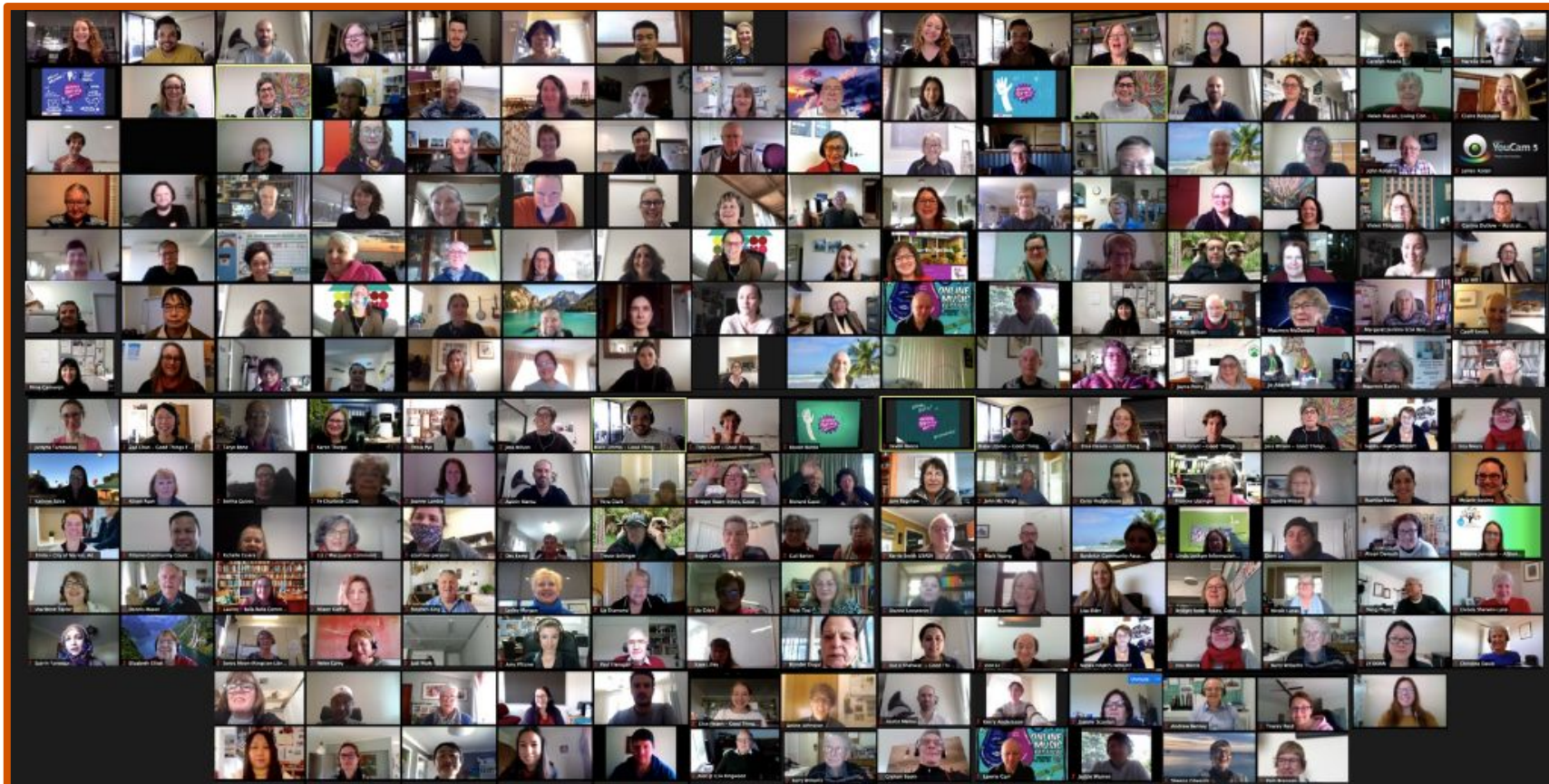
This demonstrates that there was a significant shift towards a remote delivery model that not all organisations or learners were able to rapidly transition to.



Above: Digital skill delivery models used by the Network during the closure of community organisations due to COVID-19.

Our response:

- Hosted new online skillshares and webinars to collect and share best practice for online delivery with our Network
- Held workshops on adapting to remote delivery in our Online Network Partner Meetups held in August
- Created [new downloadable tip sheets, session plans and resources](#) to support remote delivery
- [Collected and shared stories](#) to share best practice and inspire organisations to implement remote delivery models
- Existing and new grant funding available through our programs could be used by organisations to purchase software and equipment needed for remote delivery
- Created the [new Digital Devices grant](#) so learners could have access to internet connected devices at home to join online support sessions
- Adapted our digital inclusion campaign, [Get Online Week](#), to include online event models and our support resources to include best practice tips on supporting people with low digital skills to join online events.



On left: Screenshot of participants from our Network Partner Meetups.

Impact stories

Australian-Filipino Community Services, Victoria

Norminda Forteza is a Chaplain of the Australian-Filipino Community Services. With the closure of churches and places of worship, Norminda saw the importance of staying connected during a time of crisis and began leading prayers remotely using Facebook messenger.

"Through the Be Connected program, our seniors gained the digital skills to use Facebook and Facebook Messenger to connect with friends and families overseas.

Now, all of our prayer vigil sessions are done via messenger. It's important to provide a message of hope and address fears and isolation among seniors who are at home. We believe as an organisation we can share the message of strength to people of all ages and backgrounds."

"Our staff and volunteers also connect with each other using Whatsapp, they watch Tagalog films together using Facebook watch parties, and sing together on Messenger because of their knowledge gained through our digital skills programs."

Although some of their clients might not have a device or a reliable internet connection at home, Norminda says they still keep in touch by calling them on their home phones.

"Our individual support staff rings every day at an agreed time to check on their wellbeing. These calls are highly in demand for seniors living alone. We believe that in a time like this, basic digital skills can save lives. Technology is helping to alleviate social isolation, it facilitates the fast exchange of information and promotes social connection in a safe and easily accessible platform."

[Read the rest of their story.](#)



Barriers to shifting delivery models

While the majority of organisations in the Network were able to implement a limited remotely delivered digital skills support offer, barriers still remain for shifting to this delivery model.

The majority of survey respondents transitioned to some form of remote delivery, but as of July, **nearly 30%** reported not being able to deliver digital skills support programs during the shutdown period. Two main reasons emerged for this:

1. COVID-19 restrictions meant that many buildings were physically closed and organisations suspended operations, preventing program delivery
2. Learners did not have devices or data at home they could use to participate in remote or online sessions

Organisations that were well established and experienced in online delivery seemed able to transition to remote delivery models more quickly, but it's important to note that some members of their communities are still excluded from participating in online sessions as their digital skills and access to a device and/or the internet are limiting factors. In a previous network survey, **75%** of respondents said that some or all of their learners lacked digital devices to use at home. This impacted their ability to deliver digital skills programs and keep isolated people connected during social distancing.

The experience of our Network for older adult learners echos a [report by The Smith Family](#) showing many school-aged children and tertiary students from disadvantaged families have an additional barrier to undertaking remote learning and homeschooling during the pandemic of lower levels of digital access, including a lack of access to affordable data and appropriate devices.

With the support of the Australian Government, the Digital Devices Grant was implemented in April 2020 where \$1 million of funding was awarded through the Be Connected program across 215 organisations to provide loan devices and data to older Australians. Already, positive news stories have been received about this grants impact in the community and the rapidly delivered new grant initiative has been highly valued by the Network. However, this funding alone does not fill the gap in internet connected devices in homes for older Australians. By July, **almost 75%** of the organisations still reported that their biggest need is for more digital devices and data so their learners could participate in remote delivery activities.

Most organisations had learners with no access to internet connected devices at home.

Overall, several themes have emerged as the main barriers to delivering digital skills programs during the pandemic:

- Lack of internet connected devices at home for learners to use
- Difficulty in beginners accessing online tools to connect to sessions
- Limited staffing, preparedness or resources to transition delivery models and rapidly upskill amidst significant disruption
- Closure of centres for face-to-face services and suspension of services

Our response:

- Introduced the [Digital Devices Grant](#), funded through the Be Connected program enabling \$1 million to be distributed to 215 organisations to supply 1400 loan devices and data to digitally excluded older Australians
- Developed a range of downloadable resources to support community organisations to start [loan device programs](#)
- Applied 3 month extensions to Be Connected grants to allow community organisations more time to adjust their delivery models and respond to the crisis
- Broadened grant reporting requirements to include learners being supported remotely
- Raised awareness with friends and families of older Australians through a digital marketing campaign about how they can provide support to improve their loved ones digital skills, including resources available through the Network or online
- Collected and shared best practice tips with the Network on how to encourage and support learners who are beginners to access online support sessions.
- Advocated for the need for digital skills support and access to devices and data to ensure people do not get left behind or more isolated at this time
- Shared regular updates and tips with the Network on new resources available to support their community stay connected and informed, including from other organisations such as ACCAN or NBN Co

Impact stories

York Community Resource Centre, WA

Like many organisations, the York Community Resource Centre in Western Australia was closed to the public for 8 weeks due to COVID-19 restrictions. The centre is a hub for the York community, and the closure left many community members feeling isolated and disconnected from their friends and family.

Robyn Garratt, Coordinator at York CRC, says, “We had numerous phone calls daily from those vulnerable community members who needed some social outreach. We are the lifeline for a lot of our elderly community members, so at least we are still here at the end of the phone even if we're unable to have them here in person.”

After receiving a Be Connected Digital Devices grant to purchase iPads to loan out to isolated members of their community, Robyn says the response from the community has been overwhelming. “Once we announced that we had received the devices, our phones were ringing off the hook for people to start borrowing them. It’s such a humbling experience to be able to visit a senior and drop them a device, knowing it will be the key to them sharing moments with loved ones that they were unable to do so for almost two months.”

One of those seniors was Val Menezes, (pictured above) who was taking Be Connected technology lessons at the centre before the closure paused the classes. Val is now using a borrowed iPad at home to keep in touch with her daughter, who recently moved out of the cottage behind her. She’s also keeping up to date with friends on Facebook and connecting with her grandchildren using video calling.



[Read the rest of their story.](#)

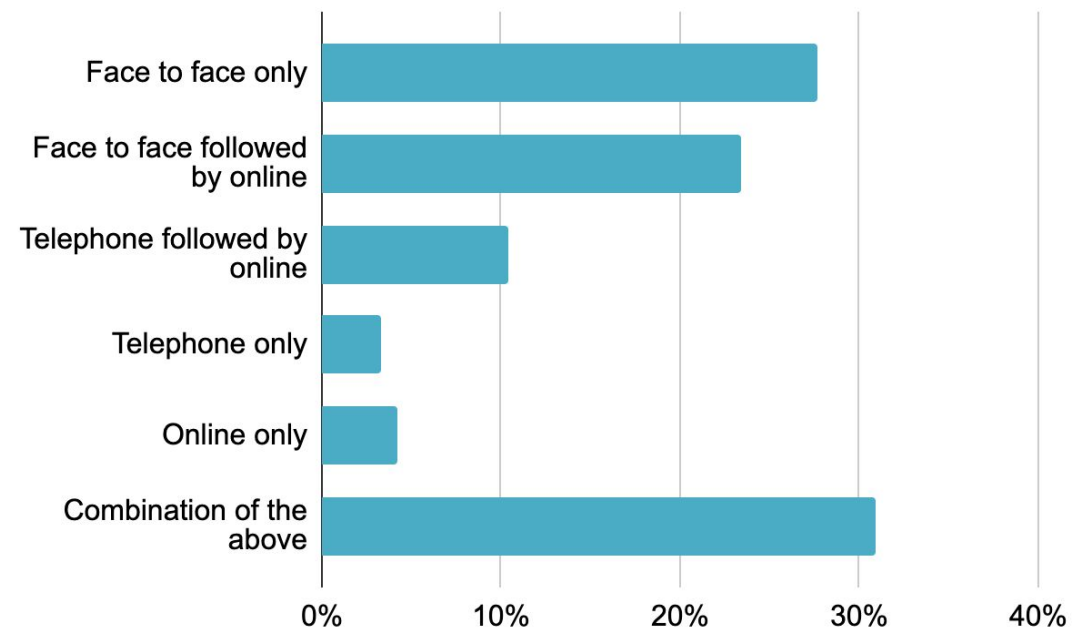
The 'new normal'

Long-term, the Network is looking to return to face-to-face delivery models for their digital skills programs, but the way they provide this support will need to adapt to the 'new normal'.

As COVID-19 restrictions ease across the country at different rates, organisations are reopening their premises for their support programs.

At the time of the COVID-19 Impact survey in July, **56%** of organisations in the Network had reopened for face-to-face support. The highest proportion of reopening was in Tasmania and Western Australia at **over 80%**, decreasing down to **under 40%** in some eastern states. This seems to generally follow trends in COVID-19 impact and recovery statuses across different states and territories. The Victorian Network has closed again since this survey due to COVID-19 restrictions, which will impact the reported reopening rates.

28% of the Network anticipate a return to face-to-face only service delivery going forward due to the specific needs of their target audience. A further **23%** reported a planned return to face-to-face followed by online support. Of the **31%** who selected 'Other', many reported blended and individualised support models, which may also include in-person support. This pushes the Network's future reliance of face-to-face support models to well over half of all support models.



Above: Anticipated future digital skills program delivery models.

The percentage offering telephone-based models reduces from peak shutdown levels and only **4%** thought they would deliver programs in an online-only model. This highlights the high value the Network place on in-person support for people learning digital skills.

However, two thirds of the organisations in our Network said their communities are still hesitant to attend face-to-face sessions and many people are choosing to “bunker down”. When surveyed in July, learners who had previously attended face-to-face sessions were found to be more willing to return to a community organisation for digital skills support than those who had previously learnt online only. This infers that a familiarity with the centre and staff assists people to feel more comfortable in returning to sessions, and people new to the face-to-face model will be more hesitant to attend sessions for the first time.

Even when re-commenced, the face-to-face model will look different. Physical distancing measures (including touchless teaching of devices) have been described as increasing the difficulty for digital mentors in the Network to support beginners to get started, and new COVID Safe teaching styles will need to be adopted. Community events have previously been a significant part of digital skills program offerings, assisting community organisations to attract new learners and re-engage existing participants. Just half of respondents to the COVID-19 Impact survey said they were planning a return to community events by October 2020 reflecting the uncertain times we are living in and ongoing restrictions. The remainder either did not yet know or were not planning to do so by this date.

On left: A new resource on safely returning to-face-to-face support.

Tips for returning to face-to-face delivery during COVID-19

Keep your distance

- Adhere to social distancing requirements, keeping digital mentors and learners 1.5m away from each other. Using floor markers can assist with this.
- Ask participants to arrive as close as possible to your session start time and not to hang around after.
- Ask people to stay at home if unwell or have been in contact with someone showing symptoms of COVID-19.

Maintain good hygiene

- Have hand sanitiser and device cleaning wipes available for learners to use on arrival and at the end of the session.
- Clean any loan devices before and after each session. Follow loan device quarantine periods if required by your state or territory.
- Avoid touching equipment brought into your centre by a learner. If it is essential that you do this, wash your hands immediately before and after.
- Regularly clean frequently touched surfaces in your centre with a household detergent followed by disinfectant, or use detergent/disinfectant wipes.

Keep learners safe

- Keep a log of all learners attending sessions during social distancing for contact tracing purposes. This information should be kept for 28 days and then destroyed. [The CaptureIT sign-in sheet](#) can be used as a template if you don't have a register of your own.
- Educating learners about the COVIDSafe app is ok, but you cannot insist that attendees download the COVIDSafe app.

Stick to the guidelines

- Adhere to any policies from your organisation.
- Adhere to restrictions and rules set by [your state or territory's health department](#). These may include tighter restrictions than we've outlined and can change over time.

Be Connected
Every Australian online

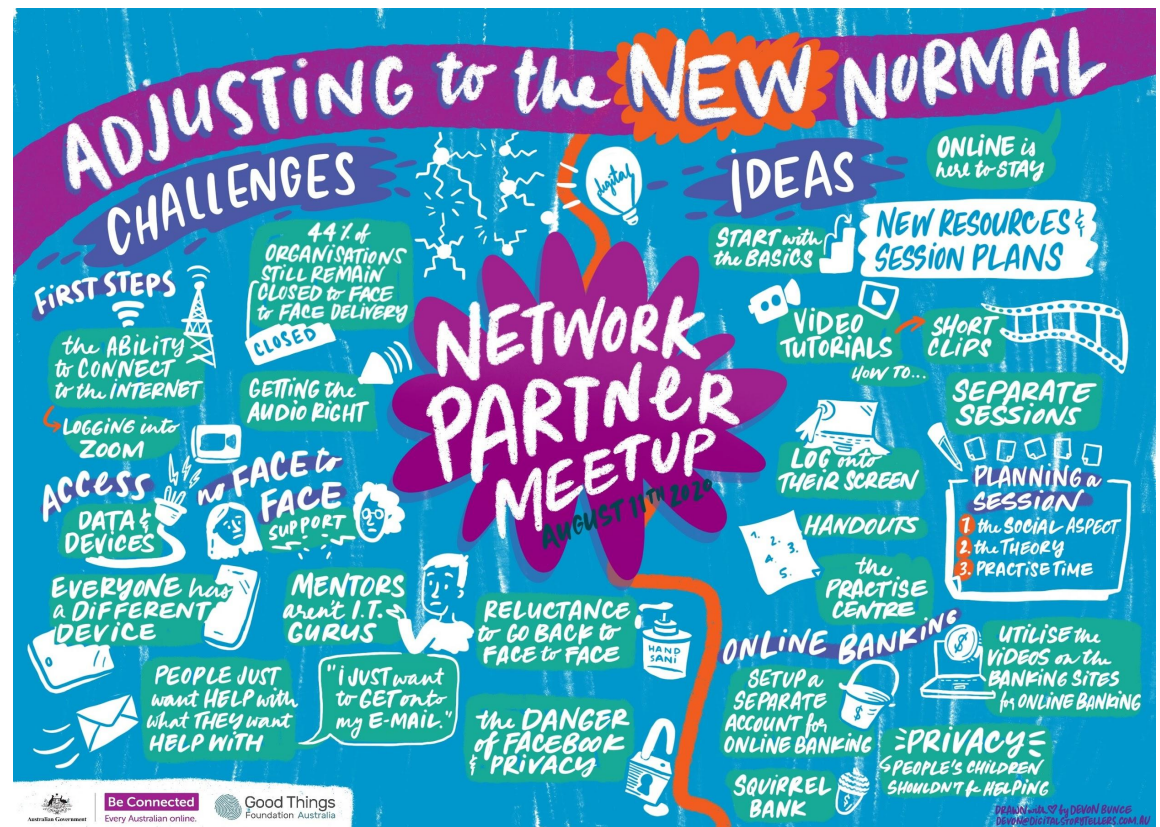
Good Things
Foundation Australia

When surveyed, learners who did not yet feel confident to attend a face-to-face session to get digital skills support reported that they will feel more comfortable doing so when the COVID-19 threat significantly decreases, such as when a vaccine is available.

Together, this indicates that there will be an extended transition period for community organisations delivering digital skills programs returning to face-to-face support, an additional period of upskilling, and the 'new normal' of face-to-face delivery may look different for some time to come. While this occurs, ongoing remote delivery program models will need to continue. An ongoing focus in support efforts on incorporating community-based remote delivery models may also help to future-proof programs ahead of future, second wave COVID-19 shutdowns, and make them more accessible to people with reduced mobility or living remotely who are otherwise unable to access in-person support at a community organisation. The three main adapted digital skills delivery models that have emerged as the 'new normal' during national COVID-19 shutdowns and recovery period are described further on p 17.

To work within this new normal environment, organisations in our network are looking for support to purchase digital devices and data for learners in their community, learning content and other resources for digital mentors such as session plans, and marketing and awareness raising activities of digital skills programs like Be Connected.

On right:
Insights and
outcomes from
our Online
Network Partner
Meetup, held 11
August 2020



Adapted support models

Three adapted digital skills support models emerged during the COVID-19 shutdowns and recovery period. These models overlap with each other and community organisations may use all at different times.

Telephone enabled

- Telephone-based support models, sometimes incorporating or building up to online delivery
- Typically delivered one-on-one, but groups possible
- Used as social or welfare check-in for isolated community members

Best practice:

- Connecting with existing clients/group members who can't participate in online or face-to-face sessions
- Used as an upskilling opportunity to join online sessions

Barriers:

- More time-consuming to provide support individually rather than in groups
- Difficult to explain concepts/skills without a demonstration

Online delivery

- Uses video conferencing software or online learning platforms to support people to gain digital skills
- Groups, individual or independent learning
- Provides a social connection and group environments, without meeting in person

Best practice:

- Delivered using video or learning platforms community members are already familiar with, building on previously acquired digital knowledge
- Individual support required to upskill people on how to use the software or apps prior to participation (eg by telephone)

Barriers:

- Learners do not have devices and data to use at home to join the sessions
- Basic skills needed to participate

Face-to-face returns

- In-person group or individual support as organisations reopen
- COVID Safe measures implemented
- Groups or individual support allow a digital mentor to see what a learner is doing
- Provide social connections
- May include online in blended learning approach

Best practice:

- One digital mentor to 6-8 people
- Used to support improvement of online social connection skills in case of future shutdowns or reintroduction of tougher restrictions
- Groups are smaller and carefully planned to ensure COVID Safety

Barriers:

- Restrictions change quickly
- Learners need to feel confident to attend in-person

Our response:

- Hosted new online skillshares and webinars to collect and share best practice for returning to face-to-face delivery with our Network
- Created a [new downloadable tip sheet](#) to support a return to face-to-face delivery
- Continue to share best practice and resources on remote delivery models for digital skills programs through events such as our Online Network Partner Meetups held in early August
- Changed the format of our digital inclusion campaign [Get Online Week](#), being held 19-25 October, so community organisations can host either an online event or COVID-Safe face-to-face event, depending on their circumstances and government health advice and restrictions for their location.
- Continue to listen to and respond to our Network's needs as they change over time, tailoring our support program.

Impacts on community organisations

Beyond the effect on digital skills programs, COVID-19 has impacted the workforce and financial security of Network Partners who deliver these services (and many others) to their communities. Despite this, most offered increased support to their community during this challenging time.

During the March - July period, organisations in the Network generally had less staff operating which put a lot of pressure on their resources and ability to deliver community supports.

The majority of staff have been working from home, with many supported by the Australian Government JobKeeper package. In many cases, volunteers either chose to stand down or were stood down by the organisation. Many staff had paid hours reduced due to the reduction in programs being run, and some staff members stepped into volunteer roles as unpaid workers. Further, the workforce have often belonged to the vulnerable cohort of the pandemic and so were self-isolating and unable to continue their work.

By July, **88%** of organisations reported that they had experienced some financial impact due to COVID-19. The scale of the consequences varied, from temporary losses to significant long term impacts. Some survey respondents indicated that due to these financial impacts, their organisation was at risk of shutting down.

Reported financial impacts included:

- Loss of various sources of income e.g. membership fees, lack of sales of items made by the organisation, rental of spaces, other services like printing
- Impact on fundraising and generating income due to inability to run programs and closure of facilities (financial and operational activity ceased completely for some organisations)
- Increased costs associated with the need to increase sanitisation in community spaces and extra equipment required to stay safe

[Recent modelling](#) by Social Ventures Australia and Centre for Social Impact supports these findings, showing that 200,000 jobs are at risk in the charitable sector without transitional funding, 88% of charities would make a loss, and 17% are financially at high risk following the impacts of COVID-19. This research also describes how organisations are also losing volunteers due to the crisis, further reducing their capacity to operate, mirroring responses received by Good Things Foundation through our network consultations.

Despite this disruption and the closure of physical premises, many members of the Network stepped up to offer more and new types of support to their community beyond their digital skills programs. **72%** of organisations in the Network reported providing additional support to their communities during the COVID-19 shutdown. This included food banks, creating social contact for their members, home delivery of essential supplies, providing transport services, and digital support for younger people eg loaning devices. A number of organisations reported a big increase in the number of people seeking their support, with one reporting a 400% increase.

In addition, 178 organisations joined the Be Connected Network between March and August 2020, adding this program to their service offering. This shows ongoing demand by community organisations for the support this digital skills program offers.

Three-quarters of the Network offered more support to their community during COVID-19 shutdowns.

Our response:

- Advocated for economic support for the community sector
- Grant funding remained open for applications throughout the shutdown period, which can be used towards staffing and operational costs to deliver digital skills programs.
- Grants were extended and grant program targets were broadened to include online delivery to relieve pressure on organisations to run digital skills programs when restrictions had disrupted their usual delivery models.

Impact stories

Middleton Hall, Tasmania

Middleton is a small, picturesque waterfront village in the Kingborough municipality of Tasmania. It is an area with poor internet connectivity and quite a few flat spots where internet access is not available. Some of their community members find it challenging to afford internet plans, and many have limited confidence using digital devices.



Through the Be Connected program, and with the help of Kingston Library, the Middleton Community Hall got connected to the internet a few months ago. The Middleton community was enjoying the access to free wifi and information until current restrictions put a halt to community gatherings.

As we all navigate this new world of social distancing, the hall has found a new patron who is providing an essential role in ensuring people can access vital services such as health care. Annia Baron, a local Clinical Psychologist and Mindset Coach, has set up in the hall to provide online mental health support to those who need it.

"Having online access during this time, in particular with COVID-19 creating increased anxiety and ambiguity, has been tremendously helpful. I've been able to conduct telehealth services for those in need of mental health and wellbeing support in a flexible and timely manner. Having an opportunity for 'face-to-face' sessions via online video services means I can keep some consistency in long-term client's care plans. And for those new to seeking mental health support, 'seeing' their psychologists face and having a 'visual' space to work within can normalise the process and make patients feel more at ease," says Annia.

Creating a sense of support and connection in their community is critical during such an uncertain time. Annia says, "People who feel vulnerable and in need of help must have services available to them that make it easy to reach out and gain strategies that better manage and improve their wellbeing. Having access to the internet at the Middleton Community Hall has been fantastic."

Impact on demand for digital support

COVID-19 has highlighted the need for essential digital skills support to stay connected, and the importance of having good digital health literacy so everyone can find reliable and relevant health information online.

While impacted financially and with limitations on workforce activity, the Network reported an increase in need for digital literacy supports. There was an increased demand and need for digital literacy overall as community members wanted to stay connected to their loved ones or needed to newly use online government and essential services, such as due to becoming unemployed. Additionally, while smaller volumes of people are being supported through face to face models, some organisations who deliver online sessions have seen their participation numbers increase.

Data from the [Be Connected Learning Portal](#) highlighted a shift in the topic areas that people were interested in. For many months prior to COVID-19 in the Be Connected program, the most frequently used course was “What is a computer?”. In May, 2020, the top 5 courses were all related to video calling and online methods of staying in contact with family and friends.

With the health crisis, our digital health literacy resources were also accessed more frequently. By July, Network Partners had shared our health resources with 3,600 learners.

With a rapid digitisation of many businesses, services and workplaces occurring in response to COVID-19, it is anticipated that digital skills supports will need to increase in order to avoid people vulnerable to digital exclusion being further left behind.

Our response

- Created new downloadable tip sheets for learners on finding reliable information online about COVID-19 to add to existing [digital health literacy resources](#)
- Created new session plan for digital mentors on finding reliable information online about COVID-19
- Supported our Network to update their details so we can more easily direct new learner referrals to organisations offering remote support.
- Implemented a digital marketing campaign to reach people who are limited users of the internet as well as loved ones of older Australians, to highlight the digital skills support available online and [how to help others](#).

Impact stories

Indochinese Elderly Refugees Association, VIC

Indochinese Elderly Refugees Association (IERA) is running [Health My Way](#) to support their community to improve their digital health literacy.

One of their learners, Mr Lan, wasn't aware of the tools available to him until he attended a Health My Way class at IERA. "My friends and people my age do not mention much about digital health tools. Before the class, I had never heard of My Health Record or what it was. And I confess that creating a MyGov account was too complicated for me."



Now, Mr Lan is a strong advocate for taking control of his health online. "I started very slowly, step by step, and thanks to the patience from IERA tutors, I now recognise the importance of My Health Record more and more. I've learned that I don't need to print out my records and I can see everything on the screen of My Health Record right under my fingertips."

Mr Lan is now counting his steps when he's outside for exercise or going to the shops, too. He is looking forward to joining his regular Monday and Wednesday digital skills sessions once social distancing restrictions have eased.

"Once you still have your health and good memory, you should learn something new - especially for the people my age. I wish I knew more about using those health tools before the COVID-19 crisis and isolation so I could have been better equipped with information and advice from health experts. But, it is never too late to learn."

[Read the rest of their story.](#)

Key outcomes

Digital inclusion programs have been significantly impacted by COVID-19, alongside other areas of Australian business, services and society. At the same time, COVID-19 has meant that having the essential digital skills to connect with friends and family, access services, shop, find work and be safe online has never been more important.

In response to this challenge, many community organisations in the Be Connected Network rapidly adapted their digital skills program delivery models and offered even more support to people in need in their community. It is anticipated that the return to traditional face-to-face support models will be slow, and when face-to-face does return, the model will need to look different to keep people safe. Remote support models had a much higher level of prevalence during national COVID-19 shutdowns, incorporating telephone-enabled support and online delivery approaches.

Digital skills program delivery models will need to continue including remote-delivery for some time to come and this will be an important way to create more digitally resilient communities moving forward. Digital mentors and community organisations need to be supported through these changes so an increasing number of people in need can access their services, while the organisations themselves recover from workforce and financial impacts of COVID-19,

Lack of access to digital devices and data at home is a significant limiting barrier to participation in remotely delivered digital skills programs, and the broader digital world. While \$1 million in Digital Devices grant funding for loan devices and data offered through the Be Connected program during the shutdown period has gone some way to addressing this problem at a critical time, there is still a significant access gap that needs to be addressed to create more digitally included communities.

Digital inclusion is no longer a nice-to-have, but a need-to-have. Digital inclusion must be a key, funded consideration in the policy-making process and service offerings of governments, community services and businesses moving forward and continued to be delivered through effective, community-based programs.

Digital inclusion is no longer a nice-to-have, but a need-to-have.

Recommendations

To address the digital inclusion challenge during COVID-19 and assist communities to become more digitally skilled and resilient as we recover, it is recommended that there is:

1. Ongoing Australian government funding for essential digital skills and digital health literacy programs

This must include programs run through trusted community organisations using blended delivery models, and grant funding to support these organisations to deliver the locally tailored programs to their communities at risk of digital exclusion, such as people on low incomes, people out of the workforce and older Australians. It is recommended that the existing Be Connected program for people aged over 50 is refunded for a further 5 years and additional programs created to reach adults of all ages.

2. Affordable digital devices and access for all

All Australians must have access to an affordable, internet connected device at home to be able to participate in the digital economy, access essential services and stay socially connected. Without internet connected devices at home, digital skills programs are at risk of not being able to deliver the positive outcomes that they have proven to do outside of the COVID era, and the digital divide will further widen.

3. Resources and support for remote delivery models

Community organisations need ongoing support to adapt to and maintain remote delivery models for digital skills programs that include telephone and online based programs, alongside support for planning to return to face-to-face models when COVID-19 recovery allows.

Contact

For more information about this report, contact us:

Good Things Foundation Australia

e: connect@goodthingsfoundation.org

p: (02) 9051 9292

w: www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au

Find our resources and support for community organisations:

www.beconnectednetwork.org.au

