



**Pre-Budget
Submission
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Good Things Foundation Australia Submission
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Good Things
Foundation Australia

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Introduction

1 in 4 Australians do not have the essential digital skills or affordable access to digital devices they need to fully participate in today’s society.¹

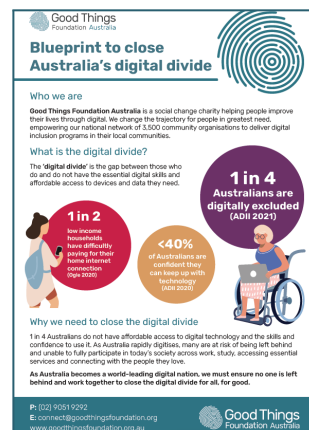
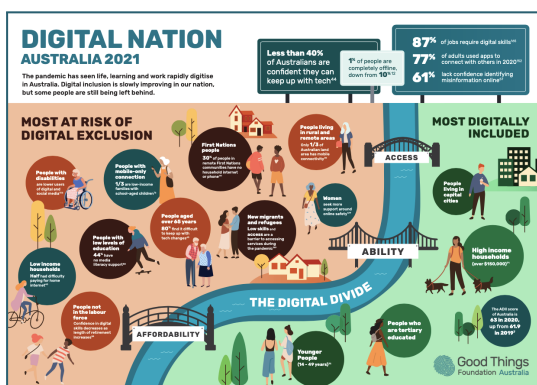
As government services move increasingly online and Australia transitions to a digital economy, investment in digital inclusion initiatives is essential to make sure no one is left behind.

This Federal Budget the Australian Government must:

1. **Re-fund the Be Connected essential digital skills program for older Australians** for a further five years (2024 - 2029) to support an additional 1 million people.
2. **Expand Be Connected to support priority groups**, investing in tailored digital skills programs and digital media literacy training for adults aged 18-50.
3. **Ensure all Australians have access to affordable digital devices and data** so they can fully participate in the digital world.
4. **Fund the creation and implementation of a government-led national digital inclusion strategy** so all Australians benefit from a coordinated approach.

Good Things Foundation Australia thanks the Australian Government for the opportunity to make this submission to the 2022/2023 Federal Budget. We would be pleased to discuss our proposed initiatives with you, so that together we can close the digital divide for all, for good.

Read more about key digital inclusion challenges in Australia in Good Things Foundation’s [Digital Nation Report](#) and our [Blueprint to close Australia’s digital divide](#).



¹ Thomas, J., Barraket, J., Parkinson, S., Wilson, C., Holcombe-James, I., Kennedy, J., Mannell, K., Brydon, A. (2021). [Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2021](#). Melbourne: RMIT, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra

Re-fund the Be Connected essential digital skills program for a further five years

As a world leader in delivering digital inclusion programs, Good Things Foundation knows that digital skills programs work when there is a combination of high quality online learning resources with grant funded, tailored support in local community settings.

The award winning Australian Government-funded Be Connected program has tested this model for people aged over 50 years and shown that it works. Since its launch in 2017 the program has supported **one million people** to gain essential digital skills through a blended face-to-face and online delivery model. It has reduced isolation, increased social connections, increased online safety and rates of digital literacy. The program delivers a **social return on investment of \$4 for every \$1 invested**.²

Good Things Foundation built, supports and manages the national [Be Connected Network](#) of **over 3,500 community organisations** located in all Australian states and territories who provide free digital mentoring support to people over 50 through this program. Be Connected is run in partnership with the eSafety Commissioner, who manage the [Be Connected Learning Portal](#), and funded by the Department of Social Services.

Over the five years that the program has been running, a highly successful model has been implemented by the lead agencies and thousands of community partners, which rapidly adapted to meet the needs of people during the COVID-19 pandemic.³ But, even with the significant impact of the Be Connected program to date, there are still many more older Australians who need support to be digitally confident, safe and resilient as the digital world around them rapidly evolves.

Positive Impact of Be Connected 2017-2022

The diverse Be Connected Network includes libraries, community centres, CALD community groups, seniors computer clubs, aged care, retirement villages and men's sheds located in communities across the country.

Through our Network, **15,000 digital mentors** have been recruited to help people to learn in a safe and friendly environment. To support these trusted volunteers and staff on the frontline of digital literacy for older Australians, we have created **300+ upskilling resources** which have been downloaded 180,000 times, and hosted over 400 professional development webinars and events. The Be Connected Learning Portal, used by the Network to support people, has over 150 learning activities aimed at seniors with low digital skills available for free on the website. Additionally, **\$20m+ in small grant funding** has been awarded to members of our 3,500 strong network of community organisations in five years, ranging in value from \$1,000 to \$50,000.

As a result of receiving this funding, organisations in the Network were able to:

² McCosker, A., Tucker, J., Critchley, C., Hiruy, K., Walshe, J., Suchowerska, R., Barraket, J. (2020) [Improving the digital inclusion of older Australians: The social impact of Be Connected](#). Swinburne University 32 of Technology, Melbourne

³ <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au/research-publications/reinventing-digital-literacy-support-crisis>

- Increase the interest of older people in their communities in improving their digital skills and raise awareness of the benefits of getting online
- Provide direct support to improve the digital skills, confidence and online safety of over 50's
- Increase the digital skills of their own staff and volunteers.

Our network of community organisations has demonstrated that they connect with their communities and support them to learn in ways that more broad-based communication channels can't. Our network highly values the support we offer through the program, with an average network satisfaction rate of 94%.

Through Be Connected over a million older Australians have been better able to stay connected with friends, family and services and participate in the digital world during the pandemic and beyond. This vital support and successful program needs to continue to support older Australians to be safe and confident online and keep up with tech changes as the population ages.

- [Read more about the impact of the Be Connected program.](#)

Recommendations

1. **Re-fund the Be Connected program to support people over 50 to gain essential digital skills for a further 5 years**

Existing funding arrangements for the Be Connected essential digital skills program for over 50's is due to expire in June 2024. This successful program needs to be extended for a further 5 years (2024-2029) to support 1 million more older Australians to improve their digital literacy. This must include:

- a) Funding over five years from July 2024-2029
- b) \$2m per year for management and upskilling of the delivery network of 3,500 community organisations, including management of a best practice small grants program
- c) \$4m per year for small grant funding of community organisations delivering digital literacy support directly to older Australians
- d) \$1m per year to market the program, reaching more older people in need with the support of the network

Expand Be Connected to support those most at risk of digital exclusion

Re-funding the existing Be Connected program will support older Australians to gain essential, basic digital skills. But, it is not just older Australians who need this support. All adults aged 18-50 with low digital skills and confidence need help to keep up with the digital world, particularly those most at risk of digital exclusion.

Less than 40% of Australians are confident they can keep up with the rapid pace of tech changes in our digital world.⁴ As Australia becomes a leading digital nation, it is critical that all Australians have the skills and confidence to use digital devices and the internet if they are to fully participate in work and study, connect with friends and family, and access essential services online. In addition we must build people's digital media literacy skills to reduce online harms and the spread of misinformation. Programs exist for children to build their digital media literacy and skills but specialised programs are now needed to target other vulnerable groups, such as adults aged 18-50 who have low levels of digital skills and digital media literacy.

Expanding Be Connected and investing in tailored digital skills programs and digital media literacy training for adults aged 18-50, delivered in community settings, will help close the digital divide. Priority groups requiring specialised support include women re-entering the workforce, people with disability, CALD communities and First Nations people.

Women in the workforce

Women are less digitally included than men in Australia,⁵ and have been harder hit by job losses during the pandemic. Investing in improving digital capabilities is a key strategy to enabling women to return to the workforce and fully participate in the digital economy.⁶ In addition to helping women back into the workforce in the short term, there is also a need for women to improve their digital skills to maintain existing jobs and participate in growth industries such as aged care, healthcare, social services, and disability support services. Support should be targeted towards women with low or no digital skills, in low income families, who are unemployed, or in workplaces at risk of automation or newly requiring digital skills.

People with disability

People with disabilities are more likely to be digitally excluded in Australia.⁷ Since 2014, the digital inclusion gap for Australians with disability has changed very little. The Australian eSafety Commission has reported people with disability being more likely to experience

⁴ Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Holcombe-James, I, Kennedy, J, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, (2020), Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra

⁵ Thomas et al, (2020)

⁶<https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/economic-security/wess/repair-and-rebuild-womens-workforce-participation-and-further-close-gender-pay-gap> accessed 27 January 2022

⁷ Thomas et al (2021)

online safety issues such as cyber-bullying, harassment, image-based abuse and technology facilitated abuse.⁸ Our work with Down Syndrome Australia on a pilot digital skills program for young people for intellectual disability is showing that additional, tailored supports are needed for people to gain the essential online safety, communications and work-ready skills required to equally participate in modern life.

- [Read about our pilot program for young people with intellectual disability](#)

CALD Communities

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, particularly newly arrived migrants or refugees, could particularly benefit from community-based, culturally appropriate digital inclusion support to be work-ready as the economy transforms. For newly arrived migrants and refugees in CALD communities, digital exclusion can have significant impacts on successful settlement in Australia, including their ability to find and maintain work or establish small businesses and participate in professional development and training opportunities.⁹ Trusted support in familiar community environments would assist to reduce the digital skills divide for this priority group and improve employment outcomes.

- [See our recommendations towards closing the digital divide for older migrants and refugees](#)
- [See our report on increasing Digital Participation of new Migrants & Refugees](#)

First Nations people

Lower levels of affordable access and online participation¹⁰ means that First Nations people in Australia are more likely to experience exclusion from our digital society. Equal digital inclusion of First Nations people has been recognised as essential to Closing the Gap, being identified as one of the 17 national targets to ensure equal access to information and services in the National Closing the Gap Agreement.¹¹ The recent establishment of the Government's First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group is welcomed and will accelerate progress towards closing the digital divide for First Nations people. It recognises that more needs to be done to ensure Indigenous Australians can benefit from the digital world and that First Nations people face significant barriers to digital inclusion, particularly in remote areas. Achieving equal levels of digital inclusion is critical for First Nations Australians to receive economic and social opportunities such as employment, social connectedness, and to access online services such as financial services, telehealth and education. Additional funding is now required to develop culturally appropriate, co-designed programs to close the digital skills gap for First Nations people.

⁸ eSafety Commissioner (2020). [Protecting voices at risk online](#)

⁹ Settlement Council of Australia & Good Things Foundation Australia (2021) [Supporting the Digital Inclusion of New Migrants and Refugees](#)

¹⁰ Thomas et al (2020)

¹¹ Australian Government, Closing the Gap in Partnership (2020). [National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#)

Digital Media Literacy Programs

Those who are most at risk of digital exclusion plus those with low levels of understanding of misinformation and online harms require tailored essential digital skills programs and support. 61% of adults in Australia lack confidence identifying misinformation online.¹² We know misinformation can cause real world harms, ranging from health and safety to electoral integrity.¹³ In order to reduce online harms for vulnerable groups, and help people with low digital media literacy skills to navigate and find reliable information, especially during a crisis, an effective, funded community-education based approach is required in line with the ACCC's recommendations.¹⁴

Recommendations

2. **Expand digital literacy support through Be Connected or other initiatives to support those most at risk of digital exclusion**
 - a) **Invest \$3 million to support 40,000+ women through a suite of specialised programs** a program for female disability workers and carers of people with disability; a program to reach and support women on low-incomes to build their digital skills and keep their kids safe online; a program to ensure a useful and timely community-based approach to digital skills support for women escaping violence; and a digital mentor program connecting women in tech with women looking to enter the tech workforce.
 - b) **Invest \$3m per year over 3 years to deliver a nationally coordinated, community-based program to support people with disability** to gain essential digital skills. This must include funding to support program coordination and accessible resources development, small grants to support delivery through existing community-based organisation networks and train-the-trainer packages for digital mentors.
 - c) **Invest \$650,000 to pilot a tailored essential digital skills education program for CALD communities**, focusing on newly arrived migrants and refugees, ensuring funding is available for appropriately translated and accessible materials, train-the-trainer activities for digital mentors, and small grant-funding for community-based delivery organisations.
 - d) **Invest \$1m in community-based education program to upskill people with low digital media literacy** on reporting and managing online harms and finding reliable information online to reduce the unintentional spread of misinformation.
 - e) **Invest in a multi-year, culturally appropriate and community-based essential digital skills education program for First Nations people** based on

¹² Notley, T Chambers, S Park, S Dezuanni, M (2021) [Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs](#). WSU, QUT and University of Canberra

¹³ ACMA (2020), [Misinformation and news quality of digital platforms in Australia: A position paper to guide code development](#)

¹⁴ ACCC (2019) [Digital Platforms Inquiry, Final Report](#)

recommendations from the Indigenous Digital Advisory Group. Programs must be co-designed and run in partnership with First Nations owned and community-controlled organisations.

Ensure all Australians have access to affordable digital devices and data

Affordability of devices and data is a significant barrier to full and equal participation in the digital economy for many Australians, and with the cost of living crisis this is only getting worse.

The Government's 2022 budget commitment to deliver free broadband to up to 30,000 unconnected families with school aged children in 2023¹⁵ and the commitment to invest \$1.1 billion to improve regional communication infrastructure under the Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia¹⁶ are welcomed initiatives. However, for people who are digitally excluded this doesn't go far enough.

Affordable Connectivity

With increased demand and usage of data, Australian households are spending more on staying connected. For low income households the proportion of income spent on internet access has increased every year since 2014.¹⁷

While mobile-only users are less digitally included than people with other connections, mobile-only use is a key strategy people implement to overcome connectivity barriers.

- [Read about Good Things Foundation's solution to digital poverty in the UK - the National Databank](#)

However, mobile data alone will not close the digital divide. A mobile connection is not always sufficient for data-intensive activities like video calling for work or school – an affordable home internet connection is also needed.

Good Things Foundation Australia, alongside over 25 other organisations, have pledged support for ACCAN's No Australian Left Offline policy proposal¹⁸ for affordable NBN for all. Low income families would be eligible to access unlimited high speed broadband internet at home at a wholesale price. If implemented, ACCAN estimates the policy would be Federal budget neutral, while low income households would pay only \$30 per month to be connected to unlimited, high speed internet connections.

¹⁵ [Labor's Plan to Boost Education Opportunities for 30,000 Families With No Internet at Home](#)

¹⁶ [Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia](#)

¹⁷ ACMA (2022) [Communication and Media in Australia How we use the internet](#)

¹⁸ [No Australian Left Offline policy proposal](#)

Affordable Digital Devices

Without digital devices to connect to the internet, the issue of access still remains.

During the pandemic, 75% of Good Things Foundation Australia's network of community organisations said that some or all of the people they support to learn digital skills lacked digital devices to use at home¹⁹. While loan digital device grants and state-level COVID responses provide a short term answer, longer term solutions at every level are required to ensure consistent access to digital devices for all.

This means making permanent emergency digital device measures where viable and embedding digital device provisions for all into policy. The creation and implementation of a National Digital Inclusion Strategy is one way this could be achieved.

Distributing digital devices through the community sector means that people have access to a suitable device and are supported to use the device in a trusted environment. Building in the option of funding for digital device provisions into grants for community-led digital skills and inclusion initiatives would create comprehensive and efficient programs.

National device banks are also a solution. In the UK, Good Things Foundation recently launched the [National Device Bank](#), which aims to provide 2 million households with refurbished donated devices free of charge. These devices are donated by businesses nationwide and then distributed via local community organisations.

National device and data banks in Australia could go far in connecting Australians without internet access. This requires investment from major telecommunications companies, businesses and government to create a sustainable data and device bank system.

To ensure that all Australians have an equal opportunity to be confident and capable digital citizens, it is vital that we bring together free connectivity, refurbished devices, and digital skills for those most in need.

Recommendations

3. Ensure all Australians have access to affordable digital devices and data
 - a) Expand current commitment to provision of free nbn connections to enable access for people on income support.
 - b) Work with Good Things Foundation Australia to develop a nation-wide digital device and data bank.

¹⁹ <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au/news/reinventing-digital-literacy-support-in-a-crisis>

Fund the creation and implementation of a National Digital Inclusion Strategy

To close the digital divide and create a stronger, more inclusive and sustainable digital economy, digital inclusion must be incorporated into policy as well as funding decisions.

National Digital Inclusion Strategy

A National Digital Inclusion Strategy will ensure no one is left behind. It should sit alongside strategies for digital transformation of government services and the future of work and be considered by the Economic Inclusion Advisory Group. The Strategy must provide a common set of goals for all levels of government to plan, support and fund digital inclusion initiatives in a coordinated manner.

Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan

As part of the Government's recently established First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group it is critical that Australia's Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan is finalised, funded and implemented. This is a much-needed plan being developed in consultation with First Nations communities and organisations towards solving digital inequality. The Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan must go beyond consultation, involving active decision-making from First Nations people at every stage of co-design and implementation. This means engaging First Nations people experiencing digital exclusion and the community organisations that support them to create a culturally appropriate and specific national digital inclusion strategy that is supported by national funding and support.

To be effective the National Digital Inclusion Strategy and Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plans must be developed and implemented in consultation with federal and state governments, corporate and community sectors, First Nations communities and people who are most at risk of digital exclusion.

Recommendations

3. **Fund the creation and implementation of a National Digital Inclusion Strategy**
 - a) **Invest in the development and implementation of a government-led national digital inclusion strategy** so all Australians benefit from a coordinated approach.
 - b) **Finalise and implement the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan** to address digital inclusion inequality and ensure that digital skills support for First Nations people is prioritised.

About Good Things Foundation Australia

Good Things Foundation Australia is a social change charity, helping people improve their lives through digital. We work with thousands of community organisations across Australia to support those hardest to reach, to improve their digital skills.

We coordinate and deliver the Australian Government-funded Be Connected program for over 50s and build capacity in community organisations through digital mentor training and resources, grants and program support.

We also develop and deliver a range of specialised digital inclusion programs for people who are most at risk of being left behind in our online world, including women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with a disability, low-income families, and migrants and refugees.

Each year we host Get Online Week - our national digital inclusion campaign supporting millions of Australians to get online and improve their digital skills.

Our programs are community-led, delivered at scale and create maximum social impact. We advocate for the 1 in 4 Australians who are digitally excluded and raise awareness of the importance of closing the digital divide for all, for good.

Learn more about our work: www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au

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