Tasmanian Council of Social Service Inc.

Submission to Regional Telecommunications Review 2021 — Issues Paper

September 2021

TasCOSS

INTEGRITY
COMPASSION
INFLUENCE

About TasCOSS

TasCOSS' vision is one Tasmania, free of poverty and inequality, where everyone has the same opportunity. Our mission is two-fold: to act as the peak body for the community services industry, and to change the systems, attitudes and behaviours that create poverty, inequality and exclusion. Our membership includes individuals and organisations active in the provision of community services to low income Tasmanians living in vulnerable and disadvantaged circumstances. TasCOSS represents the interests of our members and their service users to government, regulators, the media and the public. Through our advocacy and policy development, we draw attention to the causes of poverty and disadvantage and promote the adoption of effective solutions to address these issues.

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Introduction

TasCOSS welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021 and comment on the issues paper.

TasCOSS advocates on behalf of low income Tasmanians who often live in vulnerable and disadvantaged circumstances. We advocate for public policy that values and respects the diversity of Tasmanians and makes a real difference to the lives of people who are experiencing vulnerability. We work to ensure that the human rights of all Tasmanians are integrated into government consultation processes, policy approaches and budget allocations.

TasCOSS submissions and advocacy are strongly informed by the expertise of our members and the lived experiences of the Tasmanians we represent. In preparing this submission, we have drawn on the findings that informed TasCOSS' *Understanding Digital Inclusion in Tasmania* report.[1] We strongly encourage policymakers to revisit this report for an in-depth analysis of the issues of digital inclusion in the Tasmanian context.

Overview

Tasmania's relative remoteness, in terms of distance or access to mainland and international markets and economies, is often considered a disadvantage. However, technology and telecommunications services have the potential to reduce the disadvantage of distance and remove barriers of physical access to markets. Through additional and improved telecommunications infrastructure, the availability and quality of digital and broadband services can connect regional and rural areas with urban economies and connect islands — such as Tasmania — with the rest of the world.

Access to infrastructure such as the NBN is critical for Tasmanian business and communities and will ensure our state is not disadvantaged in the provision of — or access to — health, education, employment and government services, social connection, business services and the digital economy.

Our remoteness does present some challenges that we look to all levels of government, and the role of the Regional Telecommunications Review, to help to overcome. The cost of data transfer and inadequate infrastructure, such as fibre optic cable connection and servicing of regional and rural areas, are risks to Tasmania leveraging the full benefits of telecommunications services.

Ongoing investment in telecommunications is essential for Tasmania and will need to be prioritised in line with the needs of regional communities and population centres. Such investment will ensure our communities and industries can benefit from social and economic opportunities.

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[1] Available at premier.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/466795/Tascoss_Digital_Inclusion_Report.pdf.

Key Issues

Changing Demand

TasCOSS believes access to digital services is essential for daily life, just as other services such as electricity and water. Education, work opportunities, health and government services, social connections and finding reliable information (especially in times such as during a pandemic), are increasingly accessed through digital technologies.

Our goal is for all Tasmanians to have the access and ability to use digital technologies, so they can participate in and benefit from the social and economic opportunities it provides. But there is a digital divide where Tasmania is the most digitally disadvantaged state in Australia and the gap with the mainland is widening.

Recommendation:

1. ***Recognise reliable, high-speed internet and mobile networks as essential services and as such, ensure appropriate regulation that protects consumers in respect to price, quality, access and reliability.***

Not being able to afford access to digital technology is a key characteristic of low digital inclusion. The Committee's own report in 2018 recognised:

> *"Those who cannot afford to keep pace with new communications technologies risk being excluded from the opportunities afforded by the new digital future. The higher proportion of low income households in regional and remote Australia makes digital affordability a key barrier to digital inclusion."[2]*

While many of the solutions to deal with affordability sit with telecommunications providers, there is more that governments can do to make digital access more affordable for regional communities, such as introducing a telecommunications concession scheme for low income households and working with NBN Co to deliver more affordable broadband services.

More affordable broadband will directly benefit households by reducing cost of living pressures and will support individuals, families and businesses in regional, rural and remote areas to benefit socially and economically from the infrastructure.

Recommendation:

2. ***The federal and state/territory governments work with NBN Co and telecommunications providers to introduce low-cost broadband services for low income households.***

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[2] Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (2018), *Getting It Right Out There*, Australian Government, Canberra, p. 7.

Service Reliability

More than 65,000 Tasmanians do not have access to the internet. For some, this is due to issues of affordability and digital ability, but a large number simply don't have access or have poor connections with low bandwidth, especially households in rural and remote locations.

The Final Report of the Tasmanian *Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council* (PESRAC)[3] — established to provide advice on strategies and initiatives to support the short- to medium-, and the longer-term recovery from COVID-19 — identified digital infrastructure as a priority area for action to address the digital divide in Tasmania and to boost Tasmania's long-term recovery from the pandemic. It found coverage gaps in digital infrastructure meant that many Tasmanians, particularly those in our regions and rural areas, are being left behind in a world where life is increasingly being lived online.

The PESRAC Final Report noted poor digital infrastructure and networks, particularly in regional Tasmania, were exacerbated by mobile black spots and slow internet speeds. Regional businesses reported unreliable EFTPOS facilities due to their poor coverage and many other businesses have been unable to transition online like many of their competitors in better serviced areas.

For individuals and communities, the Final Report noted the lack of access to digital networks had left them disconnected, isolated and unable to participate in many aspects of a modern society.

The Final Report identified a need for greater investment to materially improve digital infrastructure and connectivity, and that without it, many Tasmanians will not have the ability to access essential community and health services online, work from home, undertake remote learning and exploit new ways of doing business.

The following two recommendations of the Final Report identify the need to improve Tasmania's digital infrastructure:

#10   *The State Government should develop an infrastructure pipeline that extends to including information on digital infrastructure investment plans, including from telecommunications providers, to address digital inclusion strategies.*

#33   *The State Government should take an active role, working with the Australian Government, telecommunication carriers and other providers, to improve Tasmania's digital infrastructure, as a priority, including by:*
- *undertaking a review of digital infrastructure coverage gaps and priorities for future Investment (which would inform the quantum of funding required);*
- *commissioning research to determine the economic and social gains from greater deployment of digital infrastructure;*
- *actively pursuing greater collaboration and co-investment arrangements with the Australian Government, telecommunications industry carriers and other providers; and*

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[3] Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (2021), Final Report, Department of Treasury and Finance.

- *allocating funding for digital infrastructure projects to strengthen connectivity, particularly in our regions.*

TasCOSS endorses both of these recommendations and encourages the Australian Government to take a lead in collaborating with the Tasmanian Government and telecommunications providers, to ensure these recommendations are implemented and funding programs are available to support community infrastructure needs.

Recommendations:

3. **The Australian Government takes a lead role in collaborating with the Tasmanian Government and telecommunications providers to improve Tasmania's digital infrastructure.**

4. **The Australian Government establishes a "Community Infrastructure Fund" that makes grants available to invest in regional and rural infrastructure, ensuring more Tasmanians have access to reliable, high-speed internet.**

COVID-19

The PESRAC Final Report noted the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted many examples of how Tasmanians with good digital connectivity have endured and even thrived during COVID-19. However, the Final Report also noted that seamlessly transitioning to online activities was not a universal experience and many Tasmanians simply did not (and still do not) have access to digital networks, devices and literacy, creating a greater division between the digitally included and excluded.[4]

The PESRAC consultation process uncovered a level of frustration expressed by many Tasmanians about the lack of access to digital infrastructure, under-investment and the resulting poor coverage in some areas.

This is consistent with the experiences of Tasmania's community services industry, expressed in its combined response to the PESRAC consultation process. The community services industry submission identified increased digital infrastructure and capacity for services and service users is a priority area for COVID-19 recovery and opportunity.[5]

The Final Report identified digital inclusion (recommendation 34) as a priority area for action to address the digital divide in Tasmania and to boost Tasmania's long-term recovery from the pandemic. It found many Tasmanians cannot participate in the digital world because of poor digital literacy, poor affordability, inappropriate equipment or inappropriate online access.

The following Final Report recommendation identifies a key role for government, but also community, in improving digital inclusion:

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[4] Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (2021), Final Report, Department of Treasury and Finance, p. 53.
[5] TasCOSS (2020), *Community Services Industry Combined Response*, Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council — Stage One Consultation, p. 2.

#34   The State Government should:
- *as a priority, improve digital inclusion across Tasmanian communities by:*
  - *setting clear whole-of-government Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for closing the digital divide within the next 2-5 years in each of the three key dimensions of digital inclusion: access, affordability, and digital ability; and*
  - *to achieve those KPIs, align actions and provide material funding to drive outcomes under Our Digital Future.*
- *engage with local communities to address digital inclusion at a local level; and*
- *leverage its extensive digital footprint through expanding access to its existing facilities which provide digital capability to our communities. These include:*
  - *schools;*
  - *libraries;*
  - *online access centres; and*
  - *Service Tasmania outlets.*

The Tasmanian Government is yet to articulate its plans or process for implementing this recommendation, but it signals a need for greater collaboration and involvement of community and consumer advocacy groups to be engaged in the development of digital inclusion strategies.

Recommendation:
5. ***The Australian Government provides resources to establish and fund a consumer reference group in each jurisdiction to represent the needs and concerns of regional communities to government, with a focus on:***
   - ***Input into and/or the development of digital inclusion strategies that promote regional development.***
   - ***Consultation and engagement with key stakeholders and local communities, to ensure the strategies and responses to government reflect the lived experiences of communities, service providers and those cohorts at most disadvantage.***
   - ***Facilitating partnerships with researchers, ICT experts, communities and business to strengthen consumers' voices and impact.***
   - ***Setting goals and targets over the short- and medium-terms for lifting digital inclusion levels.***

Education
One of the main challenges Tasmania faces post COVID-19, is ensuring that the many benefits of digital connectivity are available to all members of the Tasmanian community. Improving digital connectivity for all Tasmanians requires both improving the network of statewide digital infrastructure and improving the digital inclusion (literacy, accessibility and affordability) of Tasmanians.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) records Tasmania at the bottom of the table since its inception in 2014 (except in 2018 due to Tasmania's early rollout of the NBN).[6] It also notes that while

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[6] *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index*, current and previous reports, digitalinclusionindex.org.au/the-index-report/report.

digital inclusion across Tasmania has improved since 2014, the gap between the capital city Hobart and rural Tasmania has increased from 6.5 points in 2014 to 8.1 points in 2020; and the gap between Tasmania and the mainland has only fractionally improved from 3.6 points to 3.4 points respectively.

The PESRAC Final Report also noted a need to prioritise improvements in digital skills and ability, so that Tasmanians in communities and businesses can participate fully in a modern society and economy. Tasmania's poor performance on all three measures of digital inclusion — accessibility, affordability and ability — has been referenced above, but for Tasmanians experiencing disadvantage — such as those in low income households, not in the labour force, less educated and older — the evidence demonstrates they experience greater levels of digital exclusion.

COVID-19 shone a light on the number of children and young people from low income households without access to a computer, tablet or iPad at home and less likely to have access to the internet. Without actions to address these circumstances, there is widespread concern that some children will fall further behind as the digital divide increases.

During the pandemic, online learning provided greater flexibility and accessibility for some school children, but for others without the digital skills and access, using online platforms became a barrier to learning. TasCOSS was aware of some school students, particularly from lower socio-economic backgrounds, unable to access basic computer equipment and data to enable satisfactory learning-from-home.

For many Tasmanians, affordability plays a critical role in whether they have internet access. TasCOSS considers internet access is an essential service (and a vital service during periods of lockdown) and people should not have to make a choice between internet access and other cost of living essentials such as food, rent, energy and health care.

Recommendation:
6. ***The Australian Government provides funding for community-based, digital literacy initiatives that support the digital skills and knowledge needs of different population groups experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, through innovative and responsive delivery methods.***

Conclusion

The benefits of the digital economy cannot be shared when some members of the community are still facing real barriers to online participation. This creates a 'digital divide' and highlights that issues of digital exclusion are also issues of social justice. Those experiencing disadvantage are most likely to be left out of the digital world, further increasing social and economic inequality.

Tasmania's ADII score and the PESRAC Final Report findings provide a strong argument for the need to improve Tasmania's digital infrastructure network. They also point to the need to invest in digital skills and for measures that increase digital affordability. With reliable, widely accessible and affordable digital infrastructure and services, and a population with high levels of digital skills, Tasmania's geographic location could turn from a constraint to a thriving opportunity.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Recognise reliable, high-speed internet and mobile networks as essential services and as such, ensure appropriate regulation that protects consumers in respect to price, quality, access and reliability.

2. The federal and state/territory governments work with NBN Co and telecommunications providers to introduce low-cost broadband services for low income households.

3. The Australian Government takes a lead role in collaborating with the Tasmanian Government and telecommunications providers to improve Tasmania's digital infrastructure.

4. *The Australian Government establishes a "Community Infrastructure Fund" that makes grants available to invest in regional and rural infrastructure, ensuring more Tasmanians have access to reliable, high-speed internet.*

5. The Australian Government provides resources to establish and fund a consumer reference group in each jurisdiction to represent the needs and concerns of regional communities to government, with a focus on:
   - Input into and/or the development of digital inclusion strategies that promote regional development.
   - Consultation and engagement with key stakeholders and local communities, to ensure the strategies and responses to government reflect the lived experiences of communities, service providers and those cohorts at most disadvantage.
   - Facilitating partnerships with researchers, ICT experts, communities and business to strengthen consumers' voices and impact.
   - Setting goals and targets over the short- and medium- terms for lifting digital inclusion levels.

6. The Australian Government provides funding for community-based, digital literacy initiatives that support the digital skills and knowledge needs of different population groups experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, through innovative and responsive delivery methods.