

Submission

25 July 2023

Webform Submission

Re: Initial Data and Digital Government Strategy Submission

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (**ACCAN**) thanks the Digital Transformation Agency (**DTA**) for the opportunity to comment on the Initial Data and Digital Government Strategy Survey or Submission (**the strategy**).

ACCAN is the peak body that represents consumers on communications issues including telecommunications, broadband, and emerging new services. ACCAN provides a strong unified voice to industry and government as we work towards communications services that are trusted, inclusive and available for all.

ACCAN's submission was developed in collaboration with Wester'ly. Wester'ly is a grassroots network of community organisations in Western Sydney seeking to raise digital inclusion issues.¹

ACCAN supports the strategy's focus on:

- Ensuring people and business are at the centre of the Australian Government's data and digital activities.
- Progressing the Australian Public Services' (**APS**) transition to a policy and implementation environment driven by data and digital technologies.
- Building and sustaining APS data and digital capabilities.²

ACCAN supports the strategy's commitment to 'ensure everyone, whether they are living with disability, are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (**CALD**), have limited digital ability, or otherwise, can access and engage with services and programs'.³

ACCAN notes that ensuring consumers possess the required digital skills to interact with online government services is crucial to the success of the strategy. To engage with a digital government, Australians need:

- Adequate digital skills.
- Affordable telecommunications services and devices.
- Accessible and inclusive identification and data security measures.

Additionally, to make informed policy decisions the government should have access to up-to-date data about the digital inclusion and digital skills of Australians.

¹ Westerly. Digital Inclusion for Western Sydney. Available at: <https://www.westerly.org.au/>.

² Australian Government. Digital Transformation Agency. *Data and Digital Government Strategy*. Available at: <https://www.dataanddigital.gov.au/data-and-digital-government-strategy>.

³ Ibid.

Digital Inclusion and exclusion in Australia severely impact Australians' lives

Digital exclusion has significant impacts on educational, health and career outcomes.⁴ The latest Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) report released in July 2023 demonstrates the extent of the digital divide in Australia. The report notes:

- The number of Australians who are highly digitally excluded has declined but remains substantial at 9.4%.⁵
- Australian's digital access scores are increasing at the national level, but these improvements are not evenly shared.⁶
- Digital ability scores have declined in the low digital ability cohort.⁷
- The number of mobile-only users has slightly increased, from 9.6% in 2021 to 10.5% in 2023.⁸
- Digital inclusion remains closely linked to age. Despite gains since 2021, people over 65 maintain lower scores than the national average.⁹

Improving telecommunications service and device affordability may increase digital inclusion

To participate in online government services, consumers require telecommunications services and devices that are affordable and fit-for-purpose. ACCAN has previously submitted that many people with disability continue to be digitally excluded and experience poor outcomes due to the 'prohibitive costs of digital technologies, the limitations of current technologies and a lack of digital education and training to meet the needs of people with disability'.¹⁰

The 2023 ADII report detailed numerous key findings related to telecommunications affordability:

- 4.3% of Australians would need to pay more than 10% of their household income to gain quality, uninterrupted connectivity, falling from 14.1% in 2021.¹¹
- 27.6% of Australians experience affordability stress, falling from 39.2% in 2021.¹²
- All Australians in the lowest income quintile, and 48.3% of those in the second lowest, would have to pay more than 5% of their household income to gain quality, uninterrupted connectivity.¹³

The 2023 ADII report notes that recent improvements in telecommunications affordability are not evenly shared between different households. The report details that:

- 55% of people with disability experience affordability stress.¹⁴
- 64.1% people living in public housing experience affordability stress.¹⁵

⁴ Good Things Foundation. 2022. *The Digital Divide*. Available at: <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/the-digitaldivide/#:~:text=A%20lack%20of%20digital%20skills,access%20to%20jobs%20and%20education>.

⁵ Australian Digital Inclusion Index. 2023. *Key findings and next steps*. Available at: <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/key-findings-and-next-steps/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ ACCAN. 2022. *Australia 2021-2031 Disability Strategy Consultation*. p.4. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/2042-disability-strategy-consultation>.

¹¹ Australian Digital Inclusion Index. 2023. *Measuring Australia's digital divide*. p.19. Available at: <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/download-reports/>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid p.20.

¹⁵ Ibid p.20.

- 65.2% of people over 75 years old experience affordability stress.¹⁶
- 69.4% of people currently unemployed experience affordability stress.¹⁷

Improving digital literacy can be achieved by improving the affordability of telecommunications services and devices. To achieve this goal, ACCAN recommends the government implement:

- A concessional broadband service for households receiving government financial support.¹⁸
- A national strategy for affordable devices, to reduce the cost of devices for low-income households.¹⁹
- An independent plan comparison tool for telecommunications services, to make it easier for consumers to find the best offers available.²⁰

Consumers who are mobile only are at a disadvantage when accessing digital services

Being mobile-only may diminish consumers' ability to improve their digital skills, work, study, and access online government services. According to the 2023 ADII report, mobile only users have lower levels of digital inclusion, lower digital access, and a markedly lower digital ability than Australians who have access to more than a mobile communications device. The report noted that 10.5% of Australians are mobile-only.²¹

Consumers should be supported to access more affordable and functional internet devices such as home computers, laptops, and tablets. This should be accompanied by appropriate digital inclusion initiatives to enable consumers to gain the digital skills needed to effectively use these devices.

The strategy should include provisions for inclusive and accessible identification features and data security measures

According to research conducted by the Consumer Policy Research Centre, 94% of surveyed consumers have high concerns about online safety issues with the highest concern being data breaches and hacks.²² Consumers with limited digital literacy may limit their engagement with online government services due to a lack of confidence in their digital skills and a fear of falling victim to an online scam. The strategy should include provisions for accessible and inclusive data security measures for consumers of online government services.

Some consumers may lack the appropriate accessibility measures required to participate in online government services. The strategy should ensure that any digital identification systems should be accessible, inclusive, and available in all community languages. The government should further invest in the creation of high quality, inclusive and accessible resources to provide consumers with

¹⁶ Australian Digital Inclusion Index. 2023. Measuring Australia's digital divide. p.20. Available at: <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/download-reports/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ ACCAN, *No Australian Left Offline*, Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/no-australian-left-offline>.

¹⁹ ACCAN. 2023. *Submission to the Select Committee on Cost of Living*. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/2115-select-committee-on-the-cost-of-living>.

²⁰ ACCAN. 2023. *Independent Plan Comparison Tool Policy Position*. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/policy-positions/2123-independent-plan-comparison-tool>.

²¹ Australian Digital Inclusion Index. 2023. *Key findings and next steps*. Available at: <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/key-findings-and-next-steps/>.

²² CPRC. 2020. *CPRC 2020 Data and Technology Consumer Survey*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/cprc-2020-data-and-technology-consumer-survey/>.

personal data security skills and house those resources in a single location accompanied by a public awareness campaign.²³

ACCAN supports further government action to increase digital inclusion

ACCAN supports the Australian government's existing action on digital inclusion.²⁴ To increase the digital inclusion of Australians, the government should consider:

- Expanding the scope of current government programs focused on foundational digital skills to include cohorts such as low use and low access groups, remote First Nations consumers, newly arrived migrants, people with disability, those from CALD backgrounds and mobile only consumers.²⁵
- Improving resourcing to existing community digital inclusion programs. ACCAN's consultations and regular interaction with community digital inclusion organisations note resourcing limitations. The resourcing constraints that these organisations face may make their digital inclusions programs less effective.
- Ensuring future digital inclusion initiatives and programs are implemented in accessible formats for consumers who live with cognitive impairment, vision impairment, as well as consumers who are illiterate and consumers who are from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Allocating funding to mobile and outreach digital inclusion services that can visit areas where library and community hubs lack coverage in order to identify digitally excluded communities.
- Developing an evaluation framework for existing and future digital inclusion initiatives to ensure program effectiveness.
- Developing an accredited and endorsed digital skills framework to guide its future activities in digital literacy.²⁶
- Fostering cyber security by design in key software and apps markets to ensure that consumers engaging with digital communications devices and services are protected.²⁷
- Collecting data on digital inclusion as recommended by ACCAN's submission to the ABS 2026 Census topic consultation.²⁸
- Maintaining analogue contact points for government services to ensure all Australians can access services. This is important to ensure that some consumers for example, elderly consumers who may be unable to access online government services are not excluded from these services.

Increasing the digital literacy of Australians will improve the utilisation of online government services and contribute towards achieving the goals of the strategy. Additionally, research

²³ ACCAN. 2023. *2023-2030 Australian Cyber Security Strategy Discussion Paper Response*. p.3. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/2142-australian-cyber-security-strategy>.

²⁴ ACCAN. 2023. *ABS 2026 Census Topic Consultation Submission*. p.4. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/2133-australian-bureau-of-statistics-2026-census-topic-consultation>.

²⁵ ACCAN. 2022. *5-year Productivity Inquiry: Australia's data and digital dividend*. p.12. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/2035-data-and-digital-dividend>.

²⁶ An international example of a digital skills framework is the UK government's *Essential Digital Skills framework*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/essential-digital-skills-framework#full-publication-update-history>.

²⁷ ACCAN. 2023. *2023-2030 Australian Cyber Security Strategy Discussion Paper Response*. p.1. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/2142-australian-cyber-security-strategy>.

²⁸ ACCAN. 2023. *ABS 2026 Census Topic Consultation Submission*. p.5. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/2133-australian-bureau-of-statistics-2026-census-topic-consultation>.

conducted in the UK noted that investment in digital skills training has a high cost-benefit ratio, may decrease pressure on healthcare systems and lead to general efficiency savings.²⁹

ACCAN thanks the DTA for the opportunity to comment on the strategy. Should you wish to discuss any of the issues raised in this submission further, please do not hesitate to contact me at con.gouskos@accan.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

Con Gouskos

Policy Officer

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is Australia's peak communication consumer organisation. The operation of ACCAN is made possible by funding provided by the Commonwealth of Australia under section 593 of the Telecommunications Act 1997. This funding is recovered from charges on telecommunications carriers.

ACCAN is committed to reconciliation that acknowledges Australia's past and values the unique culture and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. [Read our RAP](#)

²⁹ Centre for Economics and Business Research. 2022. *The economic impact of digital inclusion in the UK*. p.11. Available at: <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Economic-impact-of-digital-inclusion-July-2022.pdf>.