

Submission

17 October 2023

Housing and Homelessness Plan

Via email: HousingandHomelessnessPlan@dss.gov.au

Re: National Housing and Homelessness Plan

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (**ACCAN**) thanks the Department of Social Services (**the Department**) for the opportunity to comment on the National Housing and Homelessness Plan (**the Plan**).

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 supports the development of the Plan, which will inform future housing and homelessness policy in Australia over the next decade. ACCAN recommends that the Department give consideration to how digital inclusion could further support the primary objectives of the Plan.

People experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness rely on communications services to access social services, stay connected to friends and family, and participate in society.¹ However, in 2023, the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (**ADII**) noted that:

People living in public housing recorded an Index score of 11.6 points lower than the national average, with digital inclusion scores among this group growing more slowly than the rest of the population.²

ACCAN recommends that the Plan considers digital inclusion and exclusion to facilitate the active and equal participation of people experiencing housing precarity, and suggests the Department:

¹ Fisk, R. P., Gallan, A. S., Joubert, A. M., Beekhuyzen, J., Cheung, L., and Russell-Bennett, R. (2022). Healing the Digital Divide with Digital Inclusion: Enabling Human Capabilities. *Journal of Service Research*, 0(0). DOI: 10.1177/10946705221140148. Available at: [Healing the Digital Divide With Digital Inclusion: Enabling Human Capabilities - Raymond P. Fisk, Andrew S. Gallan, Alison M. Joubert, Jenine Beekhuyzen, Lilliemay Cheung, Rebekah Russell-Bennett, 2023 \(sagepub.com\)](#); Humphry, J. (2022) *Homelessness and Mobile Communication Precariously Connected*. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.; Osman, K., Marshall, A., Hourigan, A. and Malcolm, F. (2023) *Issues Paper: Digital Inclusion, Disability and Social Housing*. Queensland University of Technology Digital Media Research Centre, Brisbane, Australia. Page 14. Available at: [apo-nid323883.pdf](#).

² Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Holcombe-James, I., Ormond-Parker, L., and Ganley, L. (2023). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023*. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra. DOI: 10.25916/528s-ny91. Page 6. Available at: [Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2023](#).

- Ensures reasonable consideration is given to how access to affordable, or no cost telecommunications services can support people at risk, or experiencing housing precarity in Australia.
- Ensures reasonable consideration is given to how the digital exclusion of people living in housing precarity may impact their ability to access MyGov and other social services.

For more detailed feedback on specific questions regarding the Plan, see **Appendix A** below.

ACCAN's submission was developed in consultation with Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre, Professor Melissa Bull (Queensland University of Technology (QUT)), Dr Justine Humphry (The University of Sydney), Dr Kim Osman (QUT), and Professor Rebekah Russell-Bennett (QUT).

We thank the Department for the opportunity to comment on the Plan. Should you wish to discuss any of the issues raised in this submission further, please do not hesitate to contact me at amelia.radke@accan.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Amelia Radke
Senior Policy Adviser

Appendix A: Further responses to the Plan

Question: What are the different challenges for people experiencing homelessness in urban, regional, and rural areas?

People experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity in urban, regional, and rural areas often face different challenges. One such challenge is the need for more services in regional and rural areas to support people experiencing housing precarity.³ ACCAN recommends that the Plan considers supporting solutions in these areas and how digital inclusion is integral for many people to access social services in regional, rural, and remote Australia.

Question: What short, medium, and long-term actions can governments take to help prevent homelessness or to support people who may be at risk of becoming homeless?

ACCAN considers digital inclusion integral to supporting the short, medium, and long-term actions governments can take to mitigate homelessness in Australia. For example, ACCAN notes that service access via digital channels can enable people to access services that may prevent homelessness. To support this, ACCAN recommends the Plan consider the importance of reliable and affordable mobile and internet access in preventing homelessness and supporting people who may be at risk of becoming homeless.

Question: How can the homelessness system more effectively respond to those at risk of, or already experiencing homelessness?

ACCAN suggests that the Plan explore the role of digital inclusion when investigating how the homelessness system can more effectively respond to those at risk of, or already experiencing homelessness. In particular, the importance of service delivery to people experiencing homelessness, which can be facilitated through communications services.

Through stakeholder consultation, ACCAN identified that when people exit a program of housing support, they often become reliant on communications services to continue having access to their case worker. During ACCAN's engagement it was noted that if people lose that support because of a lack of digital access then they were more likely to fall back into homelessness in the future. Furthermore, ACCAN suggests that digital inclusion services in libraries and schools will also be integral for people who are not yet housed.⁴

Question: How can governments capture better evidence on 'hidden' or 'invisible' homelessness (e.g. couch surfing, living in a car and overcrowding)?

Digital inclusion can play an integral role in governments capturing better evidence on 'hidden' or 'invisible' homelessness through engagement with services. For instance, if a person has reliable digital access they can be identified as needing support, inherently, by not supporting people digitally they remain hidden from governments. ACCAN recommends that the Plan further investigate how supporting people at risk of experiencing homelessness become better connected will provide essential information on 'hidden' or 'invisible' homelessness.

³ Zufferey, C. and Chung, D. (2015). 'Red dust homelessness': Housing, home and homelessness in remote Australia. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 41:13-22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.07.002>.

⁴ Russell-Bennett, R. and Bull, M. (2023). Supporting Mature Women Experiencing Housing Stress: A Novel Strengths-Based Approach. *Centre for Justice Briefing Paper*, 36:1-4. Available at: [No36 FINAL RussellBennett-Bull.pdf \(qut.edu.au\)](https://www.cjrb.org.au/No36_FINAL_RussellBennett-Bull.pdf).

Question: What strategies can be used to build awareness of available services and supports for people who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness?

Supporting the digital inclusion of people who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness could build their awareness of available services and supports in Australia. For example, the 'Ask Izzy' mobile website provides useful information to people living in crisis around the types of services and supports that are in their location.⁵ This is one example of how digital inclusion can be used to build awareness of available services and supports for people who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

Question: What are the most-effective wrap-around supports required to support Australians in social housing to maintain their tenancies? Are there existing effective models that could be scaled up?

People who are currently experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity need wrap-around supports to help them maintain their tenancies. ACCAN encourages the Department to give consideration to how efforts to promote digital inclusion can support the delivery of wrap-around supports. For example, effective models could include navigators as illustrated in the South Australian Aspire Social Impact Bond and digital inclusion initiatives as illustrated through the Queensland Housing with Support program.⁶ ACCAN also supports further funding being made available for wrap-around supports for people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity.

Question: How can governments improve housing and accommodation service coordination to better support individuals affected by hazards?

ACCAN recommends the Department give reasonable consideration to how communications services play a vital role in governments improving housing and accommodation service coordination for people affected by hazards. Especially, when governments are advising people where safe housing and accommodation can be located during an emergency. In addition to supporting people re-build their lives by supporting their access to various government and social services. For instance, the mobile website 'Ask Izzy' provides an example of how digital access can provide useful information to people who are in need of housing due to hazards.⁷

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](#)

⁵ Ask Izzy. Available at: <https://askizzy.org.au/>.

⁶ Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services) (2023). *The National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issue Paper*. Page 34. Available at: https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/national-housing-and-homelessness-plan-issues-paper_2.pdf; Ibid. Page 51.

⁷ Ask Izzy. Available at: <https://askizzy.org.au/>.