Position Statement

Digital Divide

The internet has been called the great equaliser, but access is far from equal. Not only is it assumed that everyone has access but as services are increasingly moving online, it is the expectation that people can access a stable connection at almost any point in the day. For many this has created flexibility and increased accessibility, but for others without reliable access to broadband or wireless data, it only makes accessing support worse. That's why the internet must be treated as an essential service.

Our Experience

The Anglicare Australia Network provides dedicated support to improve digital inclusion, including delivering over 11,000 digital inclusion sessions each year. These initiatives support digital inclusion by educating and upskilling people or organisations on their technology use, providing access to low or no-cost technology, and delivering digital support services for those in need.

Further, our Network works extensively with people navigating financial insecurity and facing financial hardship through our financial counselling and emergency relief services. Member organisations providing this support regularly report that their clients are often locked out of accessing government support or other hardship programs due to their lack of digital access. To address this, our Network delivers one-off or emergency financial relief that covers utility bills such as internet or phone costs, to support ongoing access to digital services.

Key Issues

The internet has become essential to everyday life. While online banking, social media and web search functions have been available for years. Online services have expanded to include access to education, employment, health, and even government services.

Despite being societally treated as an essential, access to the internet is not regulated as such. As it stands, internet service providers are not under legal obligations to assist customers to make payments or help make products affordable in the way that energy or water companies are. As a result, low-income Australians are less likely to have reliable broadband connections.

One in four Australians is "digitally excluded," lacking the resources or skills to regularly access internet connection.[1] Nearly 60 percent of low-income households struggle to pay for mobile data or broadband connections.[2]

Affordability of internet services is disproportionately worse for First Nations and regional communities. While six percent of people reported cost as a limiting factor to getting online, this number climbed to 19 percent for First Nations people and continued climbing to 27 percent for regional and rural communities.[3] Further, data speeds with up to 90 percent slower in regional communities with large First Nations communities compared to urban Australia.

Further, low-income households are more likely to use pre-paid data plans, but will end up being financially penalised. Anglicare Australia's Poverty Premium report shows that a percent could pay 142 percent more for a gigabyte of mobile data purchased through a pre-paid plan, instead of a contract or post-paid plan.[4]

Anglicare Australia calls for the standard to mirror regulations placed on other essential services, and require telecommunications companies to proactively offering hardship programs and payment plans to customers experiencing financial hardship.

Recommended Actions

Anglicare Australia calls for:

- Recognising internet access is an essential service, thereby ensuring access through affordable products, including a low-income broadband product
- More strongly regulating telecommunications providers, ensuring they provide support to people experiencing financial hardship and struggling to pay bills
- Building digital literacy skills, including through partnerships with community service organisations.

1 ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra (2023) Australian Digital Inclusion Index.

2 Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (2021) Addressing Telecommunication Affordability: Evaluating Support for Low Income Customers.

3 Op cit: Australian Digital Inclusion Index (2023)

4 Anglicare Australia (2023) The Poverty Premium: The High Cost of Poverty in Australia.

Anglicare Australia
in every Community