

Social infrastructure for digital skills development: The role of neighbourhood houses in supporting digital inclusion

Dr Ellen van Holstein
RMIT University

Associate Professor
Nicky Dulfer
University of Melbourne

Dr Kieran Hegarty
RMIT University

Dr Emma McRae
RMIT University



Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) 2024 Grants Program. The operation of the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network 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.

We thank our partners Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre, especially Tony Milne and Elle Morell; Farnham Street Neighbourhood Learning Centre, especially Cathy Connop; and Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, especially David Perry, for their guidance and collaboration. We are particularly grateful to the teachers, neighbourhood house staff and students who generously shared their time and experiences with us.



How to cite this report

Van Holstein, E., Dulfer, N., Hegarty, K., & McRae, E. (2026). *Social infrastructure for digital skills development: The role of neighbourhood houses in supporting digital inclusion*. Social Equity Research Centre, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University.

<https://doi.org/10.25439/rmt.31236349>

Photo and design credits

Photos have been supplied by Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre, and Farnham Street Neighbourhood Learning Centre for use in this report.

Report design by Studio Elevenses.

Contents

Executive summary and recommendations	4	Digital skills support is widespread and growing	19
Introduction	7	Digital skills support is provided by a mix of general staff, educators, volunteers and external trainers	20
The role of neighbourhood houses in supporting digital inclusion	9	Digital skills support is reliant on insecure funding, limited teaching capacity and out-of-date equipment	20
What is digital inclusion?	9	Digital skills support is widespread, increasing in scale and complexity and reliant on insecure funding	21
Who experiences digital exclusion?	9	Digital support in practice: insights from two neighbourhood houses	22
How much support is needed?	9	Introducing the neighbourhood houses, their classes, staff and students	22
Why does it matter?	10	Neighbourhood houses provide a unique service in a unique way	23
What are neighbourhood houses?	11	Non-judgmental and encouraging first contact is crucial for engaging in digital support	24
How do neighbourhood houses support digital inclusion?	12	Digital skills classes combine individualised support with collective learning	25
Why do we need to know more?	12	Teaching digital skills development is highly complex work	26
Research methods	13	The importance of confidence and trust for learning to be safe online	28
Statewide survey	13	Funding and compliance requirements sit uneasily with the complex realities of digital support	29
Staff and student interviews	14	Conclusion	31
Class observations	14	References	32
The current state of digital support in Victoria's neighbourhood house sector	15		
Digital skills support is now a core activity across the neighbourhood house network	16		
Neighbourhood house programs are reaching digitally excluded groups	17		
Neighbourhood houses are responding to highly complex challenges and significant barriers to inclusion	18		

Executive summary and recommendations

Neighbourhood houses – not-for-profit, community-based centres that support skills development, social connection and community participation – have become one of the main places where people at risk of digital exclusion go for help with their digital lives. They provide this help through a mix of structured digital skills classes and informal, one-on-one support.

This report examines how neighbourhood houses support digital inclusion, who is being helped, what kinds of challenges they are dealing with, and what settings enable or undermine this work. It combines a statewide survey of 103 neighbourhood houses – approximately a quarter of the Victorian sector – with in-depth qualitative case studies of two metropolitan centres. The survey provides a sector-level picture of digital skills support and the case studies offer detailed accounts of everyday practice, based on interviews with staff and students, class observations and a collaborative analysis workshop.

Neighbourhood houses have become one of the main places where people at risk of digital exclusion go for help with their digital lives.

The findings show that digital skills support is now a core activity across the neighbourhood house network and that some of the least connected and least resourced people are turning to neighbourhood houses to navigate a digital-by-default service environment. 95% of surveyed neighbourhood houses provide some form of digital support, and most are doing more of it than they ever have before.

Neighbourhood houses are reaching groups that national data show to be most at risk of digital exclusion, including older people, people with disability, public housing residents, job seekers and people from cultural and linguistic minorities. The problems that people present with are highly complex and often high-stakes. Staff rarely deal with simple or singular questions. Instead, they are asked to respond to bundles of issues that combine the challenges of outdated or shared devices, mobile-only and pre-paid connections, confusing portals and security systems, forgotten passwords, fear of making mistakes, and heightened anxiety about fraud and scams. Many of the tasks that people request help with are time-sensitive, linked to income, housing, or migration status. Teachers and reception staff provide this support on whatever devices people use, moving constantly between different phones, tablets and laptops and translating instructions given by services and platforms to the realities of each person's context. While this individualised support is crucial, it reduces the time available for structured classes and the collective learning opportunities they offer.

At the same time, the funding base for digital support and education is fragile. A significant share of digital help that neighbourhood houses provide is performed without dedicated funding as it is cross-subsidised from other programs or absorbed by people in general coordination and reception roles. Equipment is often outdated and in short supply, and staff are juggling rising demand for digital skills education with limited paid preparation time and growing administrative and reporting requirements. Education and funding frameworks, especially those tied to Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE), often prioritise employment outcomes, while many learners primarily need basic, slow-paced, everyday digital skills and urgent troubleshooting.

Taken together, the findings show that digital inclusion is not merely a matter of ensuring that people have access to devices and affordable connections, but also of whether people have access to social infrastructure that provides ongoing assistance with digital systems in interpersonal and trusted ways. Neighbourhood houses are a key part of this infrastructure.

The report's six recommendation focus on investing in neighbourhood houses as critical community infrastructure through:

- Funding for digital skills and support that is tied to demand

- Better aligning compliance frameworks with the realities of digital support
- Providing neighbourhood houses access to appropriate equipment
- Strengthening accountability for inaccessible digital services.

This shifts responsibility away from individuals “keeping up” with technological change on their own, and towards governments, funders and service providers building and sustaining the local infrastructures that make digital inclusion possible.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Fund workforce capacity for digital support

Our research shows digital support is now routine across the sector and is increasing in scale and complexity. Funding should therefore be expanded and stabilised to match demand. This includes guaranteeing and indexing core funding, plus dedicated, ongoing funding for digital support roles so neighbourhood houses can attract and retain experienced teachers.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Formalise and fund point-of-need digital help

Our research shows neighbourhood houses are providing urgent, high-stakes troubleshooting linked to income support, housing and migration. Funders should support a clearly defined, resourced “digital helpdesk” function within neighbourhood houses for urgent, personalised issues, while also retaining and expanding resourcing for group classes and peer learning formats that build shared understanding and reduce feelings of individual failure.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Establish a community connectivity and equipment fund

Neighbourhood houses and their students often rely on outdated or broken equipment. A community connectivity fund should be established that neighbourhood houses can access for digital inclusion initiatives. This fund should support coordinated schemes that enable centres to access, install and maintain up-to-date digital equipment, and to participate in programs that loan or provide suitable devices to learners (for example, shared device banks). These schemes should be designed so that devices are procured, prepared and supported centrally, rather than adding extra administrative or technical workload for neighbourhood houses. Recognising that digital-by-default service models shift support costs downstream to community organisations, governments and industry should jointly contribute to this fund.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Revise pre-accredited curricula

Our case studies show learners often arrive with highly complex, multifaceted and urgent challenges that do not fit a 10-week course structure. ACFE and other funders should revise pre-accredited curricula, assessment requirements and reporting in consultation with neighbourhood houses so that teachers can respond to urgent, one-off digital tasks without jeopardising compliance. This includes recognising a portion of funded teaching time as flexible “digital support” hours, allowing staff to work on immediate problems that matter to learners, along with the development of core skills.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Simplify educational reporting and compliance

Neighbourhood houses report that compliance burdens are often misaligned with the level of funding provided and can lead centres to discontinue otherwise valuable programs. Compliance and reporting requirements attached to digital education funding should be simplified and made proportionate to the funding provided, so that centres can tailor delivery to students’ needs and prioritise meaningful support over paperwork.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Establish a digital inclusion ombudsman

Our research shows neighbourhood houses are routinely compensating for inaccessible online services and wider systemic barriers in digital-by-default environments. The Australian Government should establish a national digital inclusion ombudsman (or expand an existing external dispute resolution scheme) to provide a single, independent complaints pathway for inaccessible digital services and systemic barriers to essential services. The ombudsman should resolve individual complaints, undertake investigations, and require service providers to produce time-bound remediation plans to fix recurring access problems. Suspected breaches of accessibility, anti-discrimination, consumer protection and privacy obligations should be referred to relevant regulators to ensure digital channels can be used safely by people with low digital skills, limited English, disability, or precarious access to devices and data.

Introduction

Access to digital technologies is now central to how people in Australia work, study, manage money, access government services and stay connected with family, friends and the wider world. As governments, banks and other essential services move to “digital-by-default” delivery, being offline, having limited internet connectivity, or lacking digital skills means being locked out of basic services and opportunities.

National data from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) shows that, despite steady improvements over the last decade, around one in five Australians (20.6%) are still excluded or highly excluded from the digital realm.¹ This exclusion is unevenly distributed. Rates of exclusion are much higher among older people, those who did not complete secondary school, public housing residents and people with disability. For these groups, gaps in access, affordability and skills compound other forms of disadvantage, and widespread assumptions about people’s ability to “just go online” create new barriers to participation.

Research on digital inclusion consistently shows that people are more likely to build confidence with technology in supportive, familiar environments, where they can ask questions, make mistakes and learn at their own pace.² In Victoria, neighbourhood houses* are a key part of this local social infrastructure that takes on new relevance in a digital society. They provide welcoming, low-cost spaces for adult and community education, social connection and practical help, and have increasingly become important places where people come to learn digital skills, use devices and troubleshoot problems with the support of trusted staff and volunteers.³

At the same time, the neighbourhood house sector is under growing pressure.⁴ Peak bodies and local centres have warned that core funding has not kept pace with costs and many houses operate at a loss. Houses call for an urgent increase in state government funding to keep doors open.⁵ Much of the digital help offered in these settings, especially one-on-one troubleshooting outside formal classes, is unfunded and otherwise under-resourced, even though it is increasingly crucial to the prevention of exclusion and financial harm for people who are already at elevated risk.

This report uses a statewide survey and two in-depth case studies to understand the role of neighbourhood houses in supporting digital inclusion.

This report focuses on digital skills training and everyday troubleshooting in neighbourhood houses, and how these practices help people who face barriers to getting online and staying safe. This includes groups at higher risk of digital exclusion, such as older people, public housing residents, people on low incomes, and community members from cultural and linguistic minorities.

The report presents findings of a statewide survey of Victorian neighbourhood houses and in-depth case studies of two metropolitan centres to understand the role of neighbourhood

* While this report focuses on Victoria, similar community-based learning and support centres operate across Australia, including neighbourhood and community centres in New South Wales and Queensland, neighbourhood houses in Tasmania, and community centres and neighbourhood houses in South Australia and Western Australia.



houses in supporting digital inclusion. The survey, distributed with the support of peak body Neighbourhood Houses Victoria (NHVic), maps the kinds of digital classes and informal support formats that neighbourhood houses currently provide, who accesses these and what kinds of challenges people present with when they seek support from staff and volunteers. The case studies draw on observations of digital skills classes, interviews with staff, teachers and students, and a collaborative analysis workshop where managers and teachers reflected on the findings and provided additional context.

Across these different sources, we explore the everyday experiences of people seeking help with devices, apps and online services, and the often-invisible labour of the staff and volunteers who support them. The report looks at how neighbourhood houses help people navigate

essential services, manage safety and privacy online, and avoid scams and other forms of online victimisation, as well as the limits of what can be done in under-resourced community settings.

By setting out this evidence, the report aims to support better design, delivery and resourcing of digital skills programs in neighbourhood houses and similar community settings. It also offers practical insights for telecommunications companies, government agencies and other service providers about the kinds of problems that drive people to seek help, and the design and policy changes that could reduce these burdens at the source. In doing so, it contributes to national efforts to reduce digital exclusion and to ensure that the shift to digital-by-default services does not leave those with few resources carrying the greatest cost.

The role of neighbourhood houses in supporting digital inclusion

What is digital inclusion?

Digital inclusion increasingly functions as a prerequisite to social and economic inclusion. The ADII, Australia's key measure of digital inclusion, understands digital inclusion as "ensuring that everyone can access, afford and has the ability to connect, participate and benefit from the digital world".⁶ It measures digital inclusion across three linked dimensions:

- **Access** to reliable connections and suitable devices
- **Affordability** of services and data relative to income
- The **Digital Ability** needed to participate safely online

Most Australians rely on the internet to manage their health, access education, banking and government services, to look for work, keep up with news and media, and stay in touch with family, friends and community.⁷ With the growing use of digital technologies across a range of domains, digital inclusion is now a precondition for full participation in social and economic life and digital exclusion creates a substantial cost and burden to those who cannot easily engage with digital services.

Who experiences digital exclusion?

Digital exclusion is shaped by structural barriers – including low incomes, insecure housing, disability and chronic illness, and limited command of English. Counter to mainstream public discourse about the digital divide, these barriers will not disappear without intervention as younger, more digitally confident cohorts replace older populations. Leading digital inclusion scholar Ellen Helsper argues that it is misleading to treat exclusion as a temporary "generational" issue that will fade as "digital natives" age.⁸ Instead, digital inequalities are continually reshaped by people's changing life circumstances and by shifts in technologies, markets and services.

Ongoing support – not one-off training – is required to sustain digital inclusion over time.

One reason digital barriers are here to stay is that digital technologies are dynamic. Routine updates, redesigns and "upgrades" to devices, apps and online services require users to frequently relearn basic tasks and adapt to new interfaces. Work on digital skills and access highlights that skills are not a fixed attribute that individuals "possess", but something that emerges through repeated practice in relatively stable environments.⁹ When devices, interfaces or systems change, even confident users can find previously learned skills no longer "fit".¹⁰ This means that an individual is never done learning digital skills and that ongoing support – not one-off training – is required to sustain digital inclusion over time.

How much support is needed?

In addition to the misguided assumption that the digital divide does not require intervention to close over time, public discourse contains strong assumptions that digital service delivery is easy and convenient for a large majority of people. However, the majority of people in Australia need support at least sometimes, and this need for support is poorly accounted for in current service delivery models. Table 1 summarises digital inclusion thresholds derived from the ADII and creates a typology for digital support needs. It identifies:

- A "highly included" group (42.2%) generally needs only minimal, self-directed help.
- Those who are "included" (37.3%) may benefit from short, periodic assistance when they encounter new tasks or services.
- Those "excluded" (11.4%) and "highly excluded" (9.2%) are much more likely to require regular, hands-on or intensive support to use essential digital services safely and effectively.

TABLE 1

Digital inclusion and typical assistance needs

Digital inclusion threshold	Share of Australian population (ADII 2025)	Who typically fits	Level of support usually required	What that level usually means in practice
Highly included	42.2%	Well connected; multiple devices; frequent use; high confidence; adapts quickly to changes	Low	Mostly self-directed; occasional help for new or complex tasks
Included	37.3%	Stable connection with some limits; confident in some areas but not others	Moderate	Short, periodic help (e.g. specific tasks, problem-solving, reassurance)
Excluded	11.4%	Often mobile-only or shared device users; unstable housing; people with disability without assistive tech; patchy coverage	High	Regular, hands-on support to complete tasks and stay safe online
Highly excluded	9.2%	Multiple forms of disadvantage; long-term low income; older adults with very low confidence; people avoiding online services altogether	Very high	Ongoing, intensive support and advocacy; often reliant on trusted intermediaries

Source: Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2025; authors' interpretation.

We approach these categories not as fixed labels for specific individuals, but as a way of understanding the different kinds and intensities of support people typically need at different levels of inclusion.

Taken together, the proportions in these categories indicate that almost 60% of Australians are likely to need at least some assistance with digital technologies, and more than 20% need regular, hands-on or ongoing support to stay connected and navigate increasingly ubiquitous digital systems.

Why does it matter?

The shift to “digital-by-default” service delivery means that banks, government services, utility companies, education providers and even emergency authorities assume that everyone can confidently transact and communicate online.

In Australia, for example, the total number of bank branches fell by 23% between 2017 and 2021, with further reductions expected in coming years.¹¹

Similar trends are evident in government and commercial services, which increasingly direct people to apps and online portals as the primary – or only – point of contact.¹²

While digital channels can improve convenience for some, research shows that “self-service” systems often shift work and risk onto individuals, especially those who already face significant barriers.¹³

The digitisation of public services and the scaling back of face-to-face services make it difficult for people who need assistance to get the support they need. As a result, many disadvantaged members of society struggle to access important services, such as social security or banking, on their own. Instead of making services easier to use for everyone, digitisation of services can leave some of the most disadvantaged people in society unable to get the help they need. If governments and service providers continue to move essential services online, they should contribute to the social infrastructure that makes access possible.

What are neighbourhood houses?

Neighbourhood houses are non-profit, community-based centres embedded in local neighbourhoods. They are usually community-managed organisations and some are run by or in partnership with local councils. They provide a mix of community development activities, adult and community education, mutual aid and low- or no-cost services such as food relief, social groups and support programs. Their place-based focus and strong local relationships mean they are well-positioned to recognise and respond quickly to emerging needs.

In Victoria, most neighbourhood houses receive core funding through the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing’s Neighbourhood House Coordination Program (NHCP). This program provides recurrent funding to around 400 neighbourhood houses and networks to support coordination of community development activities. These activities are expected to promote participation by diverse community groups and to address locally identified priorities.



However, the sector faces growing structural pressures. Neighbourhood houses are increasingly called on to respond to rising living costs, food and housing insecurity, family violence, racism and gaps in welfare and service systems, often acting as a first point of contact for people seeking help. Evidence from statewide surveys, network reports and recent media coverage shows that demand for services such as food relief, employment support and digital help has risen sharply, with some houses reporting that demand has doubled in recent years.¹⁴ At the same time, core NHCP funding has not kept pace with inflation or the expanding scope of work, and many houses report operating at a deficit and relying on unpaid or under-paid labour to keep doors open.¹⁵

How do neighbourhood houses support digital inclusion?

Neighbourhood houses have become important – if often overlooked – sites of digital support. Early research from the sector, such as NHVic’s 2019 Australia Post-funded *Digital literacy in Neighbourhood Houses* project, documented a wide range of structured digital programs, including recurring “Computer Basics” classes and targeted courses for older people, job seekers and parents.¹⁶

While structured classes continue, a great deal of digital help now occurs informally, outside formal classes. However, much of this work is unaccredited, episodic and hidden from official reporting and funding mechanisms, even though it plays a vital role in keeping at-risk consumers safe online and connected to essential services. Because neighbourhood houses are responding to digital needs without requisite resources, this work risks eroding the sector’s capacity to respond to other forms of need on which it has traditionally focused, including teaching English language and literacy skills, offering avenues for social connection and providing emergency food relief.

Why do we need to know more?

Although digital skills training and troubleshooting have become a significant and growing part of the work neighbourhood houses do, this role is still poorly documented and rarely recognised in digital inclusion research and in policy that underpins sector funding.

At the same time, research on digitalised welfare and public services shows that “digital-by-default” models often assume individuals can and should manage complex online systems alone, framing difficulties as a matter of motivation or skills rather than system design.¹⁷ In practice, many people rely on trusted intermediaries to meet these expectations, but the labour of these intermediaries, and the efforts of people to locate and approach them, is largely invisible in policy and funding frameworks.

This report provides detailed evidence on how neighbourhood houses are supporting digital inclusion for those at risk of exclusion.

This research responds to the clear need for detailed evidence on how neighbourhood houses are responding to digital support needs, who is being helped, what kinds of issues they are dealing with, and what this work costs in terms of staff time, emotional labour and trade-offs with other activities. Building on our previous research into digital inequality and the “alternate infrastructures” in community settings that support public housing residents’ access to online connectivity and digital services,¹⁸ its aim is to make neighbourhood houses’ digital support work visible and legible, as well as offering insights into the complex and crucial intermediary role neighbourhood houses play in providing access to services and skills for people at risk of digital and social exclusion.

Research methods

This project involved four interrelated stages:

STAGE 1

A statewide survey of current approaches to digital skill acquisition in neighbourhood houses

STAGE 2

Interviews with neighbourhood house managers and facilitators of digital skills programs

STAGE 3

Situated observation of digital skill programs and troubleshooting

STAGE 4

Interviews with students of neighbourhood houses

The analysis of these components included a collaborative analysis workshop with centre managers and digital skill teachers.

Observations and interviews took place at two neighbourhood houses in metropolitan Melbourne, chosen for their contrasting approaches to digital skills training and their diverse student populations. These centres provide rich case studies of personalised digital skills training and troubleshooting in practice, but they do not capture the full variety of digital skills topics and approaches in the sector. The qualitative findings should therefore be read as detailed illustrations of practice rather than a representative picture of the work that is being performed across the neighbourhood house sector.

Statewide survey

To build a current picture of how neighbourhood houses across Victoria support digital inclusion, we designed a short online survey for managers and coordinators of Victorian neighbourhood houses. The survey was distributed and promoted by NHVic and gathered evidence on:

- The types of activities neighbourhood houses offer (structured classes, drop-in support, one-to-one help)
- The structure and accreditation of courses
- Topics and tasks most commonly taught or supported
- The workforce involved in delivery (staff roles, volunteers, external trainers)
- The groups being supported
- The digital barriers and challenges most frequently encountered
- The organisational context, including funding sources, stability of funding, and how long digital support has been provided

Open-ended questions allowed respondents to describe pressures, changes over time and any contextual factors that could not easily be captured through structured responses.

This statewide snapshot is particularly important given rapid changes in technology use and service delivery following the COVID-19 pandemic, which have increased demand for help while stretching the resources of neighbourhood houses.

Staff and student interviews

We conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with staff and students at the two case-study centres in metropolitan Melbourne. In total, this included 12 interviews with neighbourhood house staff involved in digital support (centre managers, reception and support staff, paid digital skills teachers and a volunteer tutor) and 26 interviews with students enrolled in digital skills classes. Students included individuals with migrant backgrounds, public housing residents, people with disabilities, and older people.

Staff interviews explored how centres organise digital skills classes and ad hoc help, how they respond to the diverse needs of students, and how broader funding and policy settings shape what support is possible. Student interviews focused on participants' everyday use of digital technologies, the barriers and triggers that led them to seek help, and their experiences of learning and getting support at neighbourhood houses. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face at the centres or class venues, with a small number held online or by telephone to accommodate participants' access needs and preferences.

Structural constraints within the sector shaped who could participate and how. Many staff, including teaching and reception staff, were casually employed and already stretched beyond capacity, which limited their ability to take part in interviews or engage in research activities beyond their normal work routines.

Class observations

To understand how digital skills are taught and practised, we observed a series of digital skills classes over a two-month period. At the first centre, classes included beginner and intermediate digital skills classes, a literacy-focused program that integrated basic digital tasks, a workplace-focused digital literacy class delivered at a local primary school, and a computer class delivered in a public library setting. At the second centre, we observed a work-focused computer skills class, a beginner tablet skills class, and a workplace digital skills class. Each class was observed twice, by two different researchers, to capture both the structure of lessons and the informal interactions, questions and troubleshooting that occurred around them.

Taken together, the survey, interviews, observations and a collaborative analysis workshop with centre managers and teachers provide a robust, multi-scalar evidence base on how neighbourhood houses currently support digital inclusion, the kinds of problems people bring to these settings, and the pressure this places on organisations with limited resources providing increasingly complex and critical support to communities.

This research provides evidence at both statewide and local levels on how neighbourhood houses currently support digital inclusion.

The current state of digital support in Victoria's neighbourhood house sector

The statewide survey we conducted, allows us to provide a “big picture” of how digital skills work is organised across the Victorian neighbourhood house sector. The survey was designed to answer three broad questions:

- What kinds of digital skills support are neighbourhood houses currently providing?
- Who is being supported, and with what kinds of challenges?
- How is this work resourced, and what pressures are houses facing?

By answering these questions, the survey also updates and extends NHVic's 2019 survey on digital literacy, which suggested that centres were moving away from structured classes toward more individualised, informal support.¹⁹

A total of 103 neighbourhood houses completed all or most of the survey, representing roughly a quarter of Victoria's 400 neighbourhood houses. Just over half of respondents (54%) were based in Greater Melbourne and 46% in regional Victoria.

The results provide a balanced snapshot of the sector as a whole, capturing both metropolitan and regional perspectives, larger and smaller houses, and a variety of organisational models.



Digital skills support is now a core activity across the neighbourhood house network

The survey confirms that digital skills support is now a core activity across the neighbourhood house network, with 95% of responding houses offering some form of digital education or support.

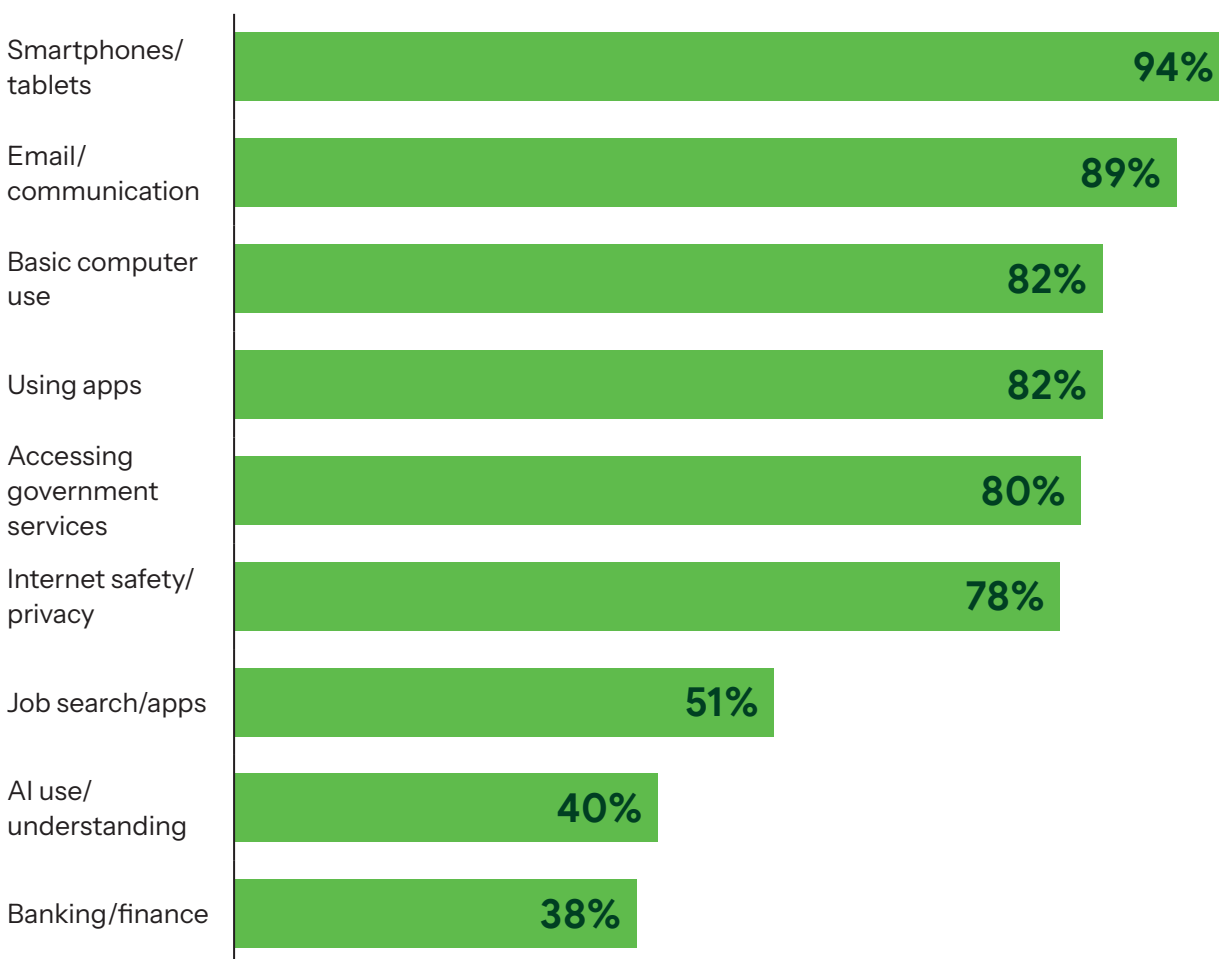
- 70% run scheduled classes or programs (for example, “Getting started with computers”, “Technology for those with a disability”, “Digital skills for English learners”)
- 79% provide informal, point-of-need help, often on a drop-in basis at reception, in corridors or before and after classes

The most common skills taught relate to the use of smartphones/tablets (94%), using email and other digital tools to communicate (89%), basic computer use (82%), using apps (82%), and accessing government services (80%) (see figure 1).

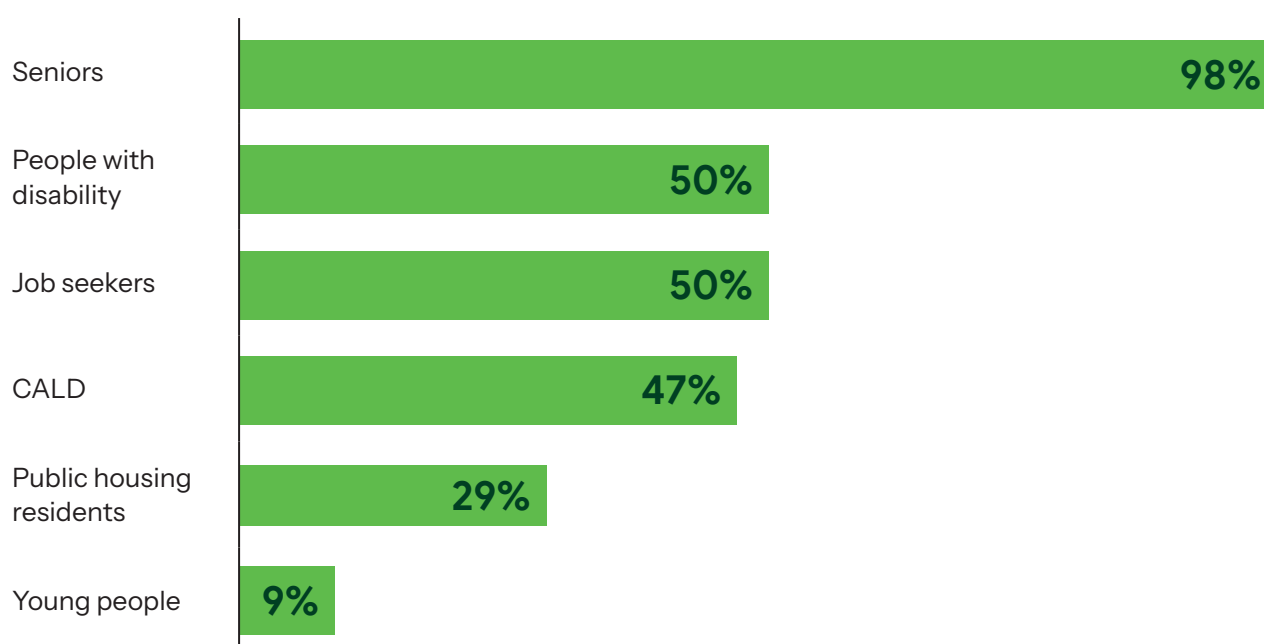
Open comments indicate that demand is particularly strong for point-of-need assistance, with some respondents describing a constant influx of community members presenting with urgent issues that do not fit into a structured curriculum.

FIGURE 1

Digital skills topics taught or supported across surveyed Victorian neighbourhood houses



Source: Digital skills development in neighbourhood houses statewide survey, August–September 2025

FIGURE 2**Groups that regularly attend digital skills programs or seek digital support**

Source: Digital skills development in neighbourhood houses statewide survey, August–September 2025

Neighbourhood house programs are reaching digitally excluded groups

The survey shows that neighbourhood houses are focusing their digital support on groups known to be at higher risk of digital exclusion (see figure 2):

- Almost all (98%) provide digital support to older community members
- Half (50%) support people with disability and job seekers
- 47% support people from cultural and linguistic minorities
- 29% support public housing residents

These categories are not mutually exclusive, and many houses work with people who belong to more than one of these categories and who experience multiple barriers.

Neighbourhood houses are providing digital skills support to some of the most digitally excluded people in Australia.

This pattern echoes ADII findings, which identify older Australians, people with disability and public housing residents as groups with significantly lower levels of digital inclusion.²⁰ Neighbourhood houses are thus providing digital skills support to some of the most digitally excluded people in Australia.

Neighbourhood houses are responding to highly complex challenges and significant barriers to inclusion

Respondents were asked to identify the most common digital challenges or barriers they see among the people they support. The dominant pattern responses described was that digital exclusion was caused by a combination of low confidence, complex and dynamic systems and precarious access. As figure 3 demonstrates, common digital challenges or barriers reported by participants were:

- Low confidence or fear of making a mistake (92%)
- Scams and online safety concerns (87%)
- Accessing and using government services (e.g. Centrelink, MyGov) (85%)
- Remembering or managing passwords (83%)
- New or unfamiliar devices (76%)

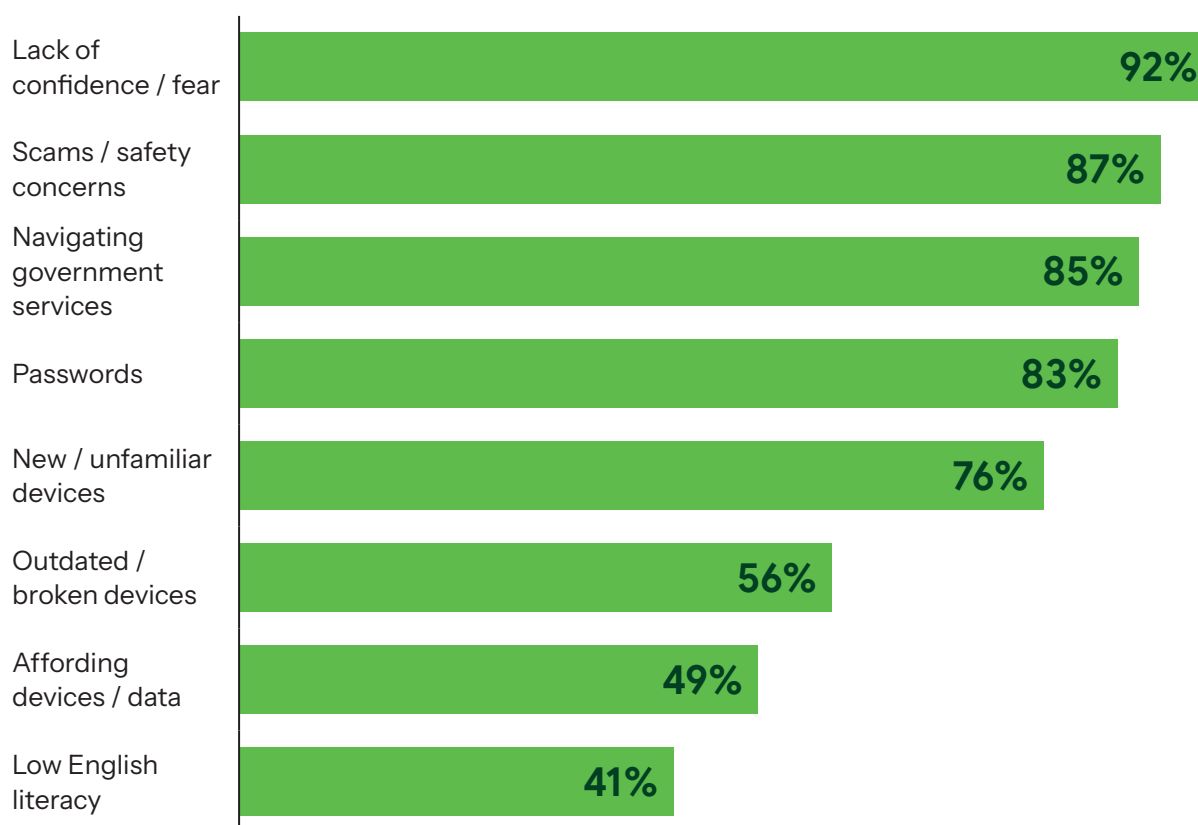
Material and structural barriers also featured strongly:

- Outdated or broken devices were reported by 56% of neighbourhood houses.
- Difficulties with the cost of devices and data were reported by 49%.
- Limited English language skills were identified as a barrier by 41% of respondents.

These findings underline that digital exclusion is not only about skills. For many people seeking support through neighbourhood houses, the challenge of digital access consists of a bundle of issues. For example, people may present with an old smartphone or tablet that is out of date, while they also have inconsistent internet access because of a reliance on pre-paid services; or they may be trying to use confusing government portals, but they have also forgotten their password. People are further hampered in resolving these issues by an underlying fear of “doing something wrong” in service systems that are known for their punitive logic, as well as by fears of being scammed.

FIGURE 3

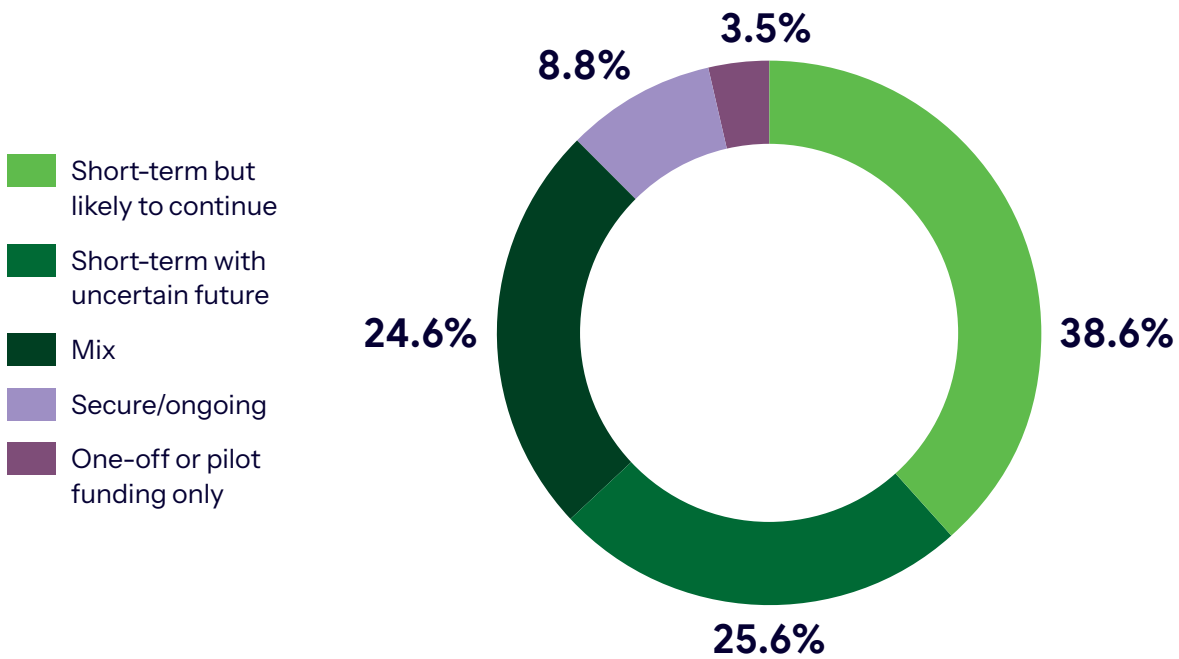
Most common digital challenges and barriers reported by neighbourhood houses



Source: Digital skills development in neighbourhood houses statewide survey, August–September 2025

FIGURE 4

Perceived stability of funding for digital skills training and support



Source: Digital skills development in neighbourhood houses statewide survey, August–September 2025

Digital skills support is widespread and growing

Digital skills support is widespread and growing:

- 69% of neighbourhood houses have been providing digital skills support for more than five years.
- Nearly half (48%) reported that they are delivering more digital skills support than 12 months ago.
- 38% said they are doing “about the same” amount.
- 14% reported providing less support than they previously did.

In open comments, respondents described demand as “growing at a rapid rate” and as being “endless and linked to all aspects of life”.

Neighbourhood houses are experiencing a sustained and open-ended expansion of digital support work as more services move online.

This language suggests that neighbourhood houses are not just observing a temporary spike in need but a sustained and open-ended expansion of demand for digital support as more services move online.

Several responding neighbourhood houses also reported having shifted from providing collective support to one-to-one, point-of-need help, because participants present with complex, personal issues that cannot easily be addressed in classes. Examples of such issues include fixing a specific problem with a MyGov account, figuring out how to set up a new device, dealing with a banking security lock-out or asking about a scam text or email.

Individualised support is also becoming more common because people seek help operating their own devices, especially smartphones (95%). This reflects broader trends documented in the ADII, where older people, people on lower incomes, people with disability and/or people living in public housing are much more likely to rely on smartphones as their primary – and sometimes only – means of access.²¹ This has practical implications for digital skills education that we explore in more detail in the case studies.

Digital skills support is provided by a mix of general staff, educators, volunteers and external trainers

The survey shows that small, mixed teams within neighbourhood houses provide digital education and support from multiple roles and funding sources.

On average, around four people are involved in digital skills delivery at each house. This typically includes:

- General staff (such as coordinators and reception staff)
- Paid education staff
- Volunteers or peer mentors
- Occasional use of external trainers for specific programs

Digital skills support is reliant on insecure funding, limited teaching capacity and out-of-date equipment

Funding for the provision of digital support is patchwork and often insecure (see figure 4):

- Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) funding is the single most common source (46%)
- Many houses also rely on participant fees (22%) and cross-subsidisation from other grants and programs (21%)
- A significant minority (32%) reported that they are “not currently funded” for providing digital skills training or support, but that they continue to provide it because of the urgency of need in local communities.

Only 9% of neighbourhood houses described their digital skills funding as secure or ongoing.

Participants pointed to a shortage of suitable tutors and the difficulty of attracting knowledgeable teachers for limited, sessional hours, especially when a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment is required. For example, one survey respondent wrote “it is difficult to attract knowledgeable tutors to the space due to the limited hours of employment on offer”. Requiring a Cert IV for occasional work was seen as “not viable... the [return on investment] is not here for them”.

Financial constraints also limit investment in equipment and the availability of spaces for teaching. Many houses reported that they are working with outdated or inadequate devices and limited physical space. For example, one respondent wrote “there is not enough funding, space or access to infrastructure like tablets, laptops, power boards, chargers, etc.”. Another noted that “our devices are outdated” and purchasing or replacing hardware and software is “a real barrier” to more effectively supporting participants.

Some neighbourhood houses reported scaling back their digital skills programs because administrative requirements and reporting burdens were not proportionate to the funding available. One respondent explained that the government funded digital skills program for older people, *Be Connected*, has “expectations and reporting requirements [that] are not aligned with the funding received”, and that they therefore discontinued participation despite local need for the program.

At the same time, pressure on neighbourhood house to provide one-on-one support despite a lack of funding is increasing. Respondents for instance wrote, “we are constantly asked to help people one-on-one, which we are not funded for”. The broader situation was summarised by one respondent as “a growing need for digital literacy training without reliable funding sources, teaching resources or support for development”.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Fund workforce capacity for digital support

Our research shows digital support is now routine across the sector and is increasing in scale and complexity. Funding should therefore be expanded and stabilised to match demand. This includes guaranteeing and indexing core funding, plus dedicated, ongoing funding for digital support roles so neighbourhood houses can attract and retain experienced teachers.

Digital skills support is widespread, increasing in scale and complexity and reliant on insecure funding

Taken together, the statewide survey findings show that:

- Digital skills support is now woven into the everyday work of neighbourhood houses. It is not a niche program but a core part of supporting communities as more services are moved online.
- Support is both structured and highly responsive. Timetabled classes coexist with increasingly important one-to-one, point-of-need help.

- Neighbourhood houses are reaching those who are most at risk of digital exclusion – particularly older people, people with disability, job seekers, people who speak languages other than English and public housing residents – and are working with them on concrete tasks such as staying safe from scams, accessing government services, and managing passwords.
- Workforce and funding arrangements are fragile. Digital inclusion work is being held together by small teams of staff and volunteers, drawing on short-term funding and, in many cases, no dedicated funding at all.
- Equipment is often outdated and inadequate, limiting what can be achieved even when demand is high and staff are supported.

The survey highlights the mismatch at the heart of current digital inclusion efforts. Neighbourhood houses are proving to be trusted local intermediaries to government and commercial services. They are places where people can bring their devices and challenges and receive personalised help to navigate complex digital systems. Yet, the organisational and funding base for this work, and for the sector as a whole, is precarious.

The provision of digital support is increasingly central to neighbourhood houses’ roles, even as they grapple with very limited resources.

The survey provides insight into patterns of need and demand that neighbourhood houses are observing and responding to across the state. In line with these patterns of increasing need, digital support is increasingly central to neighbourhood houses’ roles, even as they grapple with rising demand, constrained resources and ageing equipment. These patterns offer a valuable frame in which to interpret results from the two in-depth case studies that follow in the next sections of the report. Importantly, it shows that the two centres that are examined in depth are not isolated cases, but that research observations fit into this wider pattern.

Digital support in practice: insights from two neighbourhood houses

This section reports on the findings of interviews and observations that we conducted in two metropolitan neighbourhood houses that offer different formats of digital skills classes, that take different approaches to digital support and troubleshooting, and that experience different pressures and opportunities in terms of their staffing, funding and user base. In these two settings, we observed a range of digital skills classes that are differently advertised as focusing on beginner, intermediate and workplace skills, or on skills specific to a device (e.g. a tablet) or objective (e.g. finding work). We also interviewed students about their aspirations and experiences, and staff about their professional backgrounds and the challenges they experience in their work.

Class observations and interviews with staff and students at two neighbourhood houses illustrate the highly complex, relational work of digital skills support.

This next section focuses on the main insights gleaned from these components of the research. This includes tensions between collective and personalised approaches to teaching and troubleshooting, the importance of trusting, interpersonal relationships for effective teaching and support, and the precarity and strain that neighbourhood houses have to tolerate in order to provide support and education that is not available elsewhere.

Introducing the neighbourhood houses, their classes, staff and students

Observations and interviews took place at two metropolitan neighbourhood houses: Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre (CNLC) and Farnham Street Neighbourhood Learning Centre (FSNLC). CNLC is a community organisation delivering adult community education and related support services for diverse cohorts, including migrants and refugees, alongside broader family and community programs. FSNLC works with communities in the Flemington/Kensington area and provides adult education and community support programs aimed at strengthening participation and wellbeing. In our fieldwork, we saw two different ways of organising day-to-day troubleshooting: issues that could be addressed quite quickly (such as a lost password) that would be dealt with on the spot, while more complex issues were often triaged, with students referred to dedicated support.

Student participants reflected the diverse communities that attend neighbourhood houses for digital support. We interviewed 26 students aged 30 to 77 (18 women and 8 men). Many spoke a language other than English as a first language (including Arabic, Mandarin, Vietnamese and Cantonese, among others), and several described living with disability or restricted mobility. Staff participants also represented a mix of roles and forms of expertise within neighbourhood houses. Across the two case-study sites, we interviewed 12 staff and volunteers whose responsibilities ranged from centre management and program coordination to education delivery and front-of-house reception and support. This mix highlights that digital assistance is provided not only by specialist teachers, but also through everyday interactions and triage by general staff and volunteers.

Interviews with students across the two centres revealed a range of pathways that had led them to their neighbourhood house for digital classes and to access support. Some participants came across classes by chance when looking for ways to fill in spare time, others were referred to classes by staff when they attended the neighbourhood house for other reasons, and a few people who took classes off site, at a library or school, did not initially realise the class was provided by a neighbourhood house. Across these varied pathways, participants described neighbourhood houses as one of the few places where it was possible to get patient, ongoing help with both basic skills and specific problems, without high costs, strict eligibility rules or time-limited appointments.

Neighbourhood houses are one of the few places where participants can get digital support without high costs, strict eligibility rules or time-limited appointments.

Students reported a range of triggers for seeking digital skills support: life events such as retirement, illness, relationship changes or a new caring role; the need to enhance employment opportunities; or a desire to stay in touch with family and community. Some also described a more diffuse sense of being left behind by rapid digitisation – feeling that “everything is going on the computer, for shopping online, banking, most of the things are on the computer” (STU10) – and everyday interactions assume a level of comfort and confidence with technology they did not feel they had.

The two neighbourhood houses advertise digital skills classes with different foci (e.g. beginner skills, workplace skills), but classes have very similar curriculum and learning objectives. All the observed digital skills classes had a strong focus on practical skills development, and in every class some time was spent discussing safety and security in the digital world. In addition, many digital skills are taught in conjunction with other essential skills like language acquisition, general literacy and numeracy.

Digital skills covered in classes fall into three categories: “understanding the computer”, “using computer programs”, and “online services”. While this grouping appears to follow a logical progression from understanding the basic components and operations of a computer, to using specific programs, and finally to engaging with online services and communication platforms, the reality is very different. In practice, teachers are offering different components of this progression to different students in a single class. This is because students are generally sorted into a class based on their availability and not on their skill level. Teachers thus seek to meet the diverse learning goals of individual students in any one class. This creates a highly personalised learning environment in which teachers manage the complexities of working from what the student can do, what the student would like to be able to do, while also juggling the diverse needs of students with different levels of digital skills.

Neighbourhood houses provide a unique service in a unique way

Student and staff participants emphasised in interviews that the support that neighbourhood houses provide is unique and not available elsewhere. Classes at neighbourhood houses start from the very basics, and from the skill level the student is at. Several students described starting from a point where “just knowing the very foundations of a mouse was alien to me, a left and a right, what was that?” (STU01) or where they “didn’t know how to switch [the computer] on” (STU11). Many other education providers and services provide program specific classes focused on packages such as Microsoft Excel or Adobe Photoshop. These classes assume a minimum baseline of digital competence. Neighbourhood houses teach and support people who do not meet that baseline and whose options for skills development are therefore limited.

Neighbourhood houses offer digital support as part of their program of other services and activities. This way, neighbourhood houses are able to offer their support to a group of people who do not seek out, but who greatly benefit from digital classes and support. People might first join an English conversation class or come in for emergency food relief and then realise this is somewhere they can safely admit to not knowing how to use email, fill in an online form or understand multi-factor authentication. One student traced her pathway from English language classes into digital skills classes, describing how the welcoming atmosphere at the neighbourhood house provided a sense of safety for approaching an unfamiliar digital world:

I used to go there... to learn English. Then I really had the feeling that this is a very relaxed and very lovely place... I thought, oh, I will explore and plus I did not know much about computer (STU13).

Neighbourhood houses' function of making digital systems accessible is supported by the quality of staff-user relationships that they develop.

Because neighbourhood house staff work closely with their user base, they are often familiar with people's family, housing or health situations. They can see when a digital problem is caused or compounded by income, language skills, caring responsibilities or trauma, and respond accordingly – for example, by adjusting expectations, scheduling extra time, or linking someone to other forms of support. In this way, neighbourhood houses' function of making digital systems accessible is supported by the quality of staff-user relationships that they develop. Neighbourhood houses offer a safe space where people can ask questions and express concerns, and where they receive ongoing, in-person help that is hard to find elsewhere.

Neighbourhood houses commonly provide support with complex applications for passports, visas, restraining orders or divorces, or with other urgent issues that need immediate resolution. Because neighbourhood houses are not funded to provide these types of support, providing it places a strain on staff. However, the urgent need for this type of support and the knowledge that it is not possible for participants to acquire it elsewhere makes it hard for neighbourhood houses to cease this service. As one staff member said:

There's an extreme need for that program. It's probably the most critical program, but we can't get funding for it... But I also think there's just not anywhere else [for students] to go (STA10).

Non-judgmental and encouraging first contact is crucial for engaging in digital support

For people experiencing digital exclusion, coming to a neighbourhood house for digital skills support is neither straightforward nor inevitable. People often arrive only after other options have been exhausted: family members are too busy, services feel rushed or intimidating, or previous attempts to learn have ended in frustration. Several participants described a long period of "making do" before seeking help. One student explained that although family would "guide me" by saying "if you want to do this, you need to basically go here, touch that... and then if I get stuck, call", this help was "limited because they are professionals themselves and with their own family and 24/7 working lives". It became "one point at time or send it to me, I'll correct it type of thing" (STU01).

Others spoke about depending heavily on a partner or child to complete online tasks for them, until changes in circumstances forced them to find another solution, for example when adult children moved overseas or got married, or when relationships ended. As one participant put it:

Everything, my email, my message, my everything, big responsibility for her [my daughter]. She do it, everything. Now she got married... it's very, very, very hard for me (STU04).



In this context, the very first interaction at the neighbourhood house matters. Students emphasised that what made it possible to enrol was not just the existence of a class, but the way staff invited them in, explained options in plain language and reassured them. For people who are “worried sometimes because I’m not confident with online things” (STU20) or “don’t want to touch it because I’m afraid maybe it will be damaged” (STU18), a warm reception and clear explanation of what to expect was often the difference between walking away and signing up.

Several described how a simple phone call or front-desk conversation shifted what felt possible. One student explained that what made the difference was “just saying hello because I could see her smile on the phone”, adding that “if that hello was in a different tone, I would’ve locked myself back into myself” (STU01). Another described how staff not only helped with an immediate problem but actively encouraged her to enrol:

She gave me [the teacher’s] number, and she gave me the book[ing] and the time, and she said, you should go there. She said not just sit home. What are you going to do? You’re going there. She encouraged me (STU10).

Initial contact is therefore not a minor administrative step, but a form of educational work. Listening to what people are struggling with, translating that into a recommendation to enrol in a particular class or one-to-one support format, and signalling that they will not be judged when they admit what they do not know are all staff practices that make learning possible. For people who have felt out of place “now that everything is going digital” (STU20) and a need to reduce dependence on family and “start to do by myself” (STU18), the first conversation at the neighbourhood house is often the moment where digital learning becomes thinkable.

Digital skills classes combine individualised support with collective learning

Neighbourhood houses combine the tailored benefits of individualised support with the greater impact and reach of structured classes. People seeking support at neighbourhood houses bring different devices and a wide variety of prior experience with digital technologies. Many also seek urgent help with digital problems that are time sensitive, for example because their digital tasks are connected to welfare entitlements or visa applications. People seek this support both during and outside of class time, which each generates different kinds of pressures. During class times it places pressure on teachers to

balance individual needs and collective learning objectives; outside of class times it places pressure on other tasks that staff are expected to perform. The un- and under-funded nature of digital support provision is this way harming neighbourhood houses' capacity in other domains, and it is putting pressure on staff to work unpaid overtime, to reduce the time they spend providing other forms of support, or to deny some people the support they request.

Digital skills classes at neighbourhood houses employ a range of teaching methods that sit on a spectrum of individualised and collective approaches. The more individualised approaches focus on addressing the specific needs of each student and learning goals are set individually at the start of each class. This method allows for tailored instruction to tackle personal challenges and real-world problems that the student experiences in their everyday life. This approach requires highly adaptable teachers and patient students who do not mind engaging in self-study and practice while the teacher attends to the needs of other students. The collective approach, on the other hand, follows a structured lesson plan focusing on specific skills. These plans often use explicit teaching and modelling techniques, such as the "I do", "we do", "you do" teaching model, by which teachers gradually transfer responsibility to students. Most classes we observed used a blend of these two approaches, and taught skills while adapting lesson plans to the needs and queries of students. This flexible structure allows teachers to address both individual needs and group learning objectives.

The stakeholder interviews and survey findings suggest a trend toward more individualised approaches to teaching and troubleshooting in neighbourhood houses. This aligns with the highly varied contexts in which people are using technology as they use different devices and software and have different levels of prior experience. The context is further complicated by the often urgent problems tied to income, housing or eligibility deadlines that people seek to solve. The provision of individualised support therefore makes sense, but it also brings risks. Personalised service models can isolate individuals and erode collective opportunities for support.²² Multiple students we interviewed had internalised the idea

that people are individually responsible for digital inclusion, with these students often blaming themselves and personal attributes such as their age for not "keeping up". This comes through, for example, in an entrepreneurial emphasis on learning and self-improvement as the default steps people identify to overcome their experiences of inaccessibility and exclusion. Well-resourced group classes and collective learning opportunities can counter this trend by making visible that many people share similar challenges and by creating space for shared problem-solving.

The research indicates that there is an ongoing need for investment in collective support together with provision of resources for individualised approaches in teaching and troubleshooting. Based on these findings, we recommend that the role of neighbourhood houses in collective education and individualised troubleshooting is formalised, for example by funding digital helpdesks and expanding resourcing for group classes and peer learning formats.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Formalise and fund point-of-need digital help

Our research shows neighbourhood houses are providing urgent, high stakes troubleshooting linked to income support, housing and migration. Funders should support a clearly defined, resourced "digital helpdesk" function within neighbourhood houses for urgent, personalised issues, while also retaining and expanding resourcing for group classes and peer learning formats that build shared understanding and reduce feelings of individual failure.

Teaching digital skills development is highly complex work

Digital support in neighbourhood houses is not simply a matter of answering quick questions or fixing isolated problems. Teachers and staff are continually interpreting what people actually need help with, building trust over time, and juggling different levels of experience, confidence and command of English of students in the room.

They are teaching digital skills alongside literacy, problem-solving and confidence-building, often in the context of urgent life events or looming administrative deadlines. This makes digital skills development a form of intensive interpersonal work of which the consequences extend far beyond the classroom.

Complex personal circumstances are further compounded by the conditions in which classes are delivered. Neighbourhood houses often rely on outdated devices or laptops that are used for multiple classes across different learning sites. During classes, we observed frequent disruptions in learning when students encountered applications that weren't working or struggled with slow, outdated devices. This inability to provide adequate equipment results in a significant loss of instructional time, frequently leaving students frustrated as they wait for help with software or hardware that is not working properly.

Meanwhile, students themselves also arrive with a wide range of devices, from handed down laptops to smartphones purchased by family members. Some participants spoke about only having online access via their children's school laptops and being reluctant to use those in case they cause problems: "They have their own computer, like they have so much [work there] so I don't want to touch it" (STU06).

Digital skills development is a form of intensive interpersonal work that extends far beyond an instance of one-off troubleshooting.

One student, who did have their own laptop, observed that:

A lot of students come in, they don't have a computer. They don't have one. Yes. They do the lesson, they go away, they come back next time. You're not going to learn anything like that (STU12).

Staff also commented that, "it is a little bit hard because they don't have computers at home, so they can't necessarily practise" (STA08). Students were acutely aware of how this limited the development of skills:

What happens is you wait from week to week to come here. Except for this iPhone that I've got here, you come here and it's virtually like you're starting afresh (STU09).

In this context, neighbourhood house classes do complex work to bridge teaching skills on the mix of devices students use in everyday life. Teachers have to move constantly between demonstrating skills on classroom computers, explaining how things look on different phones, and answering questions about data costs, Wi-Fi and security. This is not simply a matter of "teaching computers"; it is about helping people make the most of whatever hardware and connectivity they can afford, while also supporting them to advocate for better options.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Establish a community connectivity and equipment fund

Neighbourhood houses and their students rely on outdated or broken equipment. A community connectivity fund should be established that neighbourhood houses can access for digital inclusion initiatives. This fund should support coordinated schemes that enable centres to access, install and maintain up-to-date digital equipment, and to participate in programs that loan or provide suitable devices to learners (for example, shared device banks). These schemes should be designed so that devices are procured, prepared and supported centrally, rather than adding extra administrative or technical workload for neighbourhood houses. Recognising that digital-by-default service models shift support costs downstream to community organisations, governments and industry should jointly contribute to this fund.

The importance of confidence and trust for learning to be safe online

Trust and privacy came through as central reasons why people prefer to seek digital support at a neighbourhood house rather than in commercial settings or from family members. Several students contrasted the neighbourhood house with other places where they might, in principle, get help. Family members could sometimes assist, but this could also strain relationships or feel uncomfortable when help was needed often. As one participant explained:

It was my wife that sort of pushed me into it because I've always been asking her to do everything for me, and she sort of had enough (STU11).

Another student felt it was “not very easy [to ask my children] because they're always busy themselves” (STU10).

Students described neighbourhood houses as places where they could safely ask about “MyGov and, what's that, the Victoria something [that] I've got it in here [on my phone], but I don't know how to use it” (STU05). Staff and teachers were trusted not only because they were knowledgeable, but because they were seen as patient, non-judgmental and embedded in the local community. This trust is particularly important when classes involve logging into personal accounts, dealing with sensitive information or talking frankly about fears of scams and fraud. Many participants described being “scared” or “worried” about technology, especially in relation to government services and banking (STU05, STU19).

Across both case study sites, digital skills classes were focused on helping participants overcome their fear of technology and gain confidence in using digital devices. This focus on confidence-building sits alongside an implicit recognition that digital skills are now essential for social inclusion and economic participation, and that many students at the neighbourhood house feel left behind by the way digital technologies have transformed access to services and opportunities.

Students and staff emphasised that classes help people manage very practical tasks – from banking and shopping to looking for employment and logging into government services – in a context where these activities are increasingly

“forced” online (STA04). One student told us that “now everything is going on the computer, for shopping online, banking, most of the things are on the computer. So, I have to start doing those” (STU10). Similarly, a staff member explained that:

... everyday life has totally changed because of technology, and it's so vital that people have those particular skills. That's the thing for so many people. You just want to be able to talk to someone and you can't, so it's almost forcing you to use technology. So, if you can't, you're really disadvantaged (STA05).

Some students are relatively confident with devices but anxious about doing the wrong thing in high-stakes online environments. A student told us that they were “worried sometimes because I'm not confident with online things” (STU20) and staff explained that “I've had people who ... have good computer skills, but they fear going on to especially government websites and making a mistake” (STA02).

Alongside core digital skills, teachers routinely work on literacy, problem-solving and critical thinking, and support students to reflect on their attitudes to technology, digital safety and the role they want digital tools to play in their lives.

Neighbourhood houses provide a setting where ongoing engagement with staff support the trust, confidence and safety that digital skill development requires.

The findings highlight that people need learning environments where they feel comfortable enough to admit what they do not know, to ask questions and to make mistakes. Feelings of fear and lack of safety limit people's ability to practise and repeat tasks: the very processes identified as central to building and maintaining digital skills.²³ Neighbourhood houses, as trusted, local intermediaries, provide a setting where long-term relationships with staff and teachers can support the trust, confidence and safety that digital skill development requires.

Funding and compliance requirements sit uneasily with the complex realities of digital support

The case studies show that tensions exist not only in the classroom, but also in the funding and compliance settings that shape what digital support can look like. There is a persistent mismatch between the formal structures governing digital education and the highly individualised, sometimes urgent support students need. Teachers describe tensions between delivering an agreed, funded plan for pre-accredited courses and responding to students who arrive with passwords to reset, bills to pay, or citizenship forms due that week:

We get funded for these 10-week courses, right, [but] no one wants to do a 10-week course. People have got specific things that they need to learn. But, basically, our classes are always full because there's a lot of people who need to learn stuff... because IT has become compulsory (STA04).

Managers note that curriculum and compliance regimes are poorly aligned with the realities of their student cohort: many students move in and out of classes due to health, caring or employment responsibilities; some have to stop and restart learning as crises arise; and others need to repeat content multiple times before it sticks. Teachers and coordinators must continually negotiate between fulfilling funding requirements and doing what they know is appropriate for the people in front of them. This requires teachers to be flexible and continually adapt teaching plans on the fly, to deliver classes more suited to the cohort of students seeking help at neighbourhood houses.

In this context, the new *Stronger by Design* changes that ACFE plans to introduce from 2027 are a source of great concern for neighbourhood houses, with proposed requirements for student assessments and more detailed program plans seen to threaten the ongoing feasibility of providing ACFE courses.²⁴ “We love ACFE,” one staff member said, “we just think it's incredible.

But it could come to a point where we have to say we can't do it anymore because of the funding and the change in model” (STA11). A lack of funding to support staff in delivering the extra requirements in reporting that ACFE expects, along with a shift in rationale whereby digital skills education is increasingly becoming funded as a pathway to employment, were described as “very out of touch with what's happening on the ground” (STA12).

The priority for teachers is teaching skills that are useful and applicable in students' everyday lives. One teacher commented:

So many people just find it so difficult even to book a movie ticket or make an appointment for... their child's parent-teacher interview (STA05).

Teaching students how to manage online banking safely, pay bills, book appointments and complete government forms online is increasingly urgent. Yet these skills, which are now necessary for social inclusion, are not accounted for within the funding requirements for digital skills classes.

A narrow focus on work-related outcomes in funding and compliance frameworks overlooks the broader benefits of digital inclusion across age groups.

Curriculum materials provided by funders or sourced elsewhere need to be adapted to suit students attending classes at neighbourhood houses, who need, as one teacher described, “Very simple materials. Super simplified materials” (STA04). But teachers are provided with limited time outside of teaching hours and re-use materials as much as possible because, as one teacher said, “I'm trying to be realistic that I'm only getting paid a half an hour [for preparation]” (STA03).

These tensions reflect a broader contest over the role of digital skills classes in neighbourhood houses. Much of ACFE's work focuses on getting people ready for employment, but many neighbourhood house students primarily want basic computer skills and confidence for everyday life. Neighbourhood houses find it difficult to fit these needs into compliance structures that do not take local context or community priorities into account, and the narrow focus on work-related outcomes overlooks the broader benefits that digital inclusion bring to people across different age groups.

Neighbourhood houses currently report on outcomes by documenting course completions and employment outcomes. However, many of the most important outcomes of learning digital skills at the neighbourhood house cannot be captured this way. For many of the people who attend neighbourhood houses, valued outcomes are more ephemeral and difficult to quantify. They are about confidence, a sense of belonging within a community, an ability to know when and how to seek help, and what they can and can't safely do by themselves. In order for neighbourhood houses to be financially supported to provide the urgent forms of support and skills training they offer, funding mechanisms need to be based on an understanding of the value of these additional outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Revise pre-accredited curricula

Our case studies show learners often arrive with highly complex, multifaceted and urgent challenges that do not fit a 10-week course structure. ACFE and other funders should revise pre-accredited curricula, assessment requirements and reporting in consultation with neighbourhood houses so that teachers can respond to urgent, one-off digital tasks without jeopardising compliance. This includes recognising a portion of funded teaching time as flexible "digital support" hours, allowing staff to work on immediate problems that matter to learners, along with the development of core skills.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Simplify educational reporting and compliance

Neighbourhood houses report that compliance burdens are often misaligned with the level of funding provided and can lead centres to discontinue otherwise valuable programs. Compliance and reporting requirements attached to digital education funding should be simplified and made proportionate to the funding provided, so that centres can tailor delivery to students' needs and prioritise meaningful support over paperwork.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Establish a digital inclusion ombudsman

Our research shows neighbourhood houses are routinely compensating for inaccessible online services and wider systemic barriers in digital-by-default environments. The Australian Government should establish a national digital inclusion ombudsman (or expand an existing external dispute resolution scheme) to provide a single, independent complaints pathway for inaccessible digital services and systemic barriers to essential services. The ombudsman should resolve individual complaints, undertake investigations, and require service providers to produce time-bound remediation plans to fix recurring access problems. Suspected breaches of accessibility, anti-discrimination, consumer protection and privacy obligations should be referred to relevant regulators to ensure digital channels can be used safely by people with low digital skills, limited English, disability, or precarious access to devices and data.

Conclusion

This report has shown that digital skills support is now woven into the everyday work of neighbourhood houses. Across the sector, staff and volunteers are helping people to log into MyGov, reset passwords, avoid scams, complete immigration forms, submit housing applications, and navigate banking and bills. This work is no longer incidental. It is a core part of what neighbourhood houses do to keep their communities connected, safe and able to participate in an increasingly digital society.

At the same time, the organisational base for this work is fragile. Digital support is being provided through patchwork funding, short-term grants and unpaid or under-paid labour, often with outdated equipment and limited preparation time. Compliance and reporting frameworks prioritise employment outcomes, while the people who attend classes often need basic, slow-paced, everyday skills and urgent troubleshooting. Neighbourhood houses are filling gaps left by digital-by-default services and dwindling in-person support options, but they are doing so without the resourcing or recognition that this role requires.

Digital inclusion depends on communities having trusted, local places where people can get ongoing, non-judgemental support with their digital needs.

Our findings suggest that digital inclusion does not merely rely on individual motivation, access or skills. People who are excluded or highly excluded are much more likely to require regular, hands-on or intensive support to use essential digital services safely and effectively. Digital inclusion also depends on the availability of trusted, local places where people can return over time, ask questions without embarrassment, and get help with the specific mix of devices, platforms and life events they are dealing with. Neighbourhood houses function exactly as this kind of social infrastructure. They make complex systems accessible by bridging the gaps between generic access requirements and the specific circumstances that make up an individual's digital environment and social context. This bridging work makes it possible for people who are older, on low incomes, in public housing, living with disability or who speak a language other than English to use digital technologies on their own terms.

The recommendations set out in this report focus on two linked tasks. The first is to reduce the avoidable complexity that drives demand for downstream help. The second is to stabilise and strengthen the local infrastructures that make digital inclusion possible, by investing in core funding, equipment, workforce capability and realistic compliance settings for neighbourhood houses. Without these changes, there is a risk that the costs of digital transformation will continue to fall most heavily on those with the least resources, and on the community organisations that support them. With these changes, the important role that neighbourhood houses play in building digital inclusion can be sustained.

References

- 1 Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Ormond-Parker, L., Morrison, K., Rea, H., & Ganley, L. *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: 2025 Australian Digital Inclusion Index*. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and Telstra. <https://doi.org/10.60836/mts-q-at22>
- 2 Kennedy, J., Livingstone, S., Hegarty, K., Gibson, R., & Thomas, J. (2025, January). *Improving digital inclusion for women in regional Victoria: Insights from the Victorian Women Trust's Rural Women Online program*. ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University. <https://doi.org/10.60836/ks35-rx21>; Lee, S., Hui, J., & Dillahunt, T. R. (2025). Sociocultural factors in digital skills learning: A community-based intervention among U.S. public housing adults. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3711070>; Marshall, A., Dezuanni, M., & Hourigan, A. (2025). Defining digital mentoring to advance adult digital inclusion. *Community Development Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsaf021>
- 3 Ollis, T., Starr, K., Ryan, C., & Harrison, U. (2018). Learning across the lifespan: Lifelong learning in Neighbourhood Houses in Australia. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 58(3), 449–476. <https://ala.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/AJAL-58-3-Full.pdf#page=155>; Perry, D. (2021, December). *Neighbourhood House Survey 2021 Report*. Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. <https://www.ballaratnc.org.au/images/docs/publications/2021neighbourhoodhousesurveyreport.pdf>
- 4 McShane, I., & Coffey, B. (2022). Rethinking community hubs: community facilities as critical infrastructure. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 54(February). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2022.101149>
- 5 Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. (2025, October 10). KEEP OUR DOORS OPEN: *Campaign*. <https://www.nhvic.org.au/post/keep-our-doors-open-campaign>
- 6 Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Ormond-Parker, L., Morrison, K., Rea, H., & Ganley, L. *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: 2025 Australian Digital Inclusion Index*. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and Telstra. <https://doi.org/10.60836/mts-q-at22>
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Helsper, E. (2021). *The Digital Disconnect: The Social Causes and Consequences of Digital Inequalities*. SAGE.
- 9 Richardson, L., & Bissell, D. (2019). Geographies of digital skill. *Geoforum*, 99, 278–286. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.09.014>
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Treasury. (2022, September). *Regional Banking Taskforce: Final Report*. <https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-09/p2022-260600-final-report.pdf>
- 12 Ortolan, M. (2022, July 6). Benalla in Victoria's north-east struggles with Centrelink and NDIS support after offices close. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-06/calls-to-reopen-centrelink-ndis-victoria-town-benalla/101019926>
- 13 Schou, J., & Pors, A. S. (2019). Digital by default? A qualitative study of exclusion in digitalised welfare. *Social policy & administration*, 53(3), 464–477. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12470>; Van Holstein, E., Wiesel, I., Bigby, C., & Gleeson, B. (2021). People with intellectual disability and the digitization of services. *Geoforum*, 119(January), 133–142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.12.022>

- 14 Darling, A. (2024, November 28). Elderly and vulnerable rural residents struggle with technology after 3G network shutdown. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-11-28/3g-shutdown-elderly-residents-turn-to-neighbourhood-houses/104646352>; Fullon, S. (2024, November 30). This charity helped Hamida to not feel 'scared' after she fled to Australia. Now it's under threat. *SBS News*. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/small-business-secrets/article/this-charity-helped-hamida-to-not-feel-scared-after-she-fled-to-australia-now-its-under-threat/z11nn7m3r>; Perry, D. (2021, December). Neighbourhood House Survey 2021 Report. Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. <https://www.ballaratnc.org.au/images/docs/publications/2021neighbourhoodhousesurveyreport.pdf>
- 15 Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. (2025, October 10). KEEP OUR DOORS OPEN: *Campaign*. <https://www.nhvic.org.au/post/keep-our-doors-open-campaign>
- 16 Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. (2019). *Digital literacy in neighbourhood houses*. https://web.archive.org/awa/20240511154139mp_/https://www.nhvic.org.au/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=7c6aef20-8dd4-4518-ad41-b68751f70f11
- 17 Schou, J., & Pors, A. S. (2019). Digital by default? A qualitative study of exclusion in digitalised welfare. *Social policy & administration*, 53(3), 464-477. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12470>; Van Holstein, E., Wiesel, I., Bigby, C., & Gleeson, B. (2021). People with intellectual disability and the digitization of services. *Geoforum*, 119(January), 133-142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.12.022>
- 18 Dulfer, N., Smith, C., van Holstein, E., Garner, A., Acosta Rueda, L., Rouse, L. A., Hamed, S., Cavanagh, K., & Ruppner, L. (2022). *Understanding digital inequality: An analysis of unequal connectivity in Carlton Housing Estate, Melbourne, Victoria*. Australian Communications Consumer Action Network & Melbourne Social Equity Institute, The University of Melbourne. https://socialequity.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/4249558/Understanding-Digital-Inequality-Final-Report.pdf; van Holstein, E., Dulfer, N., Smith, C., & Garner, A. (2023). The alternate infrastructures that support digital counter publics: Digital inequality in an Australian public housing estate. *Cities*, 137(June). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2023.104328>
- 19 Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. (2019). *Digital literacy in neighbourhood houses*. https://web.archive.org/awa/20240511154139mp_/https://www.nhvic.org.au/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=7c6aef20-8dd4-4518-ad41-b68751f70f11
- 20 Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Ormond-Parker, L., Morrison, K., Rea, H., & Ganley, L. *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: 2025 Australian Digital Inclusion Index*. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and Telstra. <https://doi.org/10.60836/mtsq-at22>
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Hall, E. (2011). Shopping for support: Personalisation and the new spaces and relations of commodified care for people with learning disabilities. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 12(6), 589-603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2011.601236>; Martens, K. (2018). Ageing, Impairments and Travel: Priority Setting for an Inclusive Transport System. *Transport Policy*, 63(April), 122-130. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tranpol.2017.12.001>
- 23 Richardson, L., & Bissell, D. (2019). Geographies of digital skill. *Geoforum*, 99, 278-286. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.09.014>
- 24 Adult, Community and Further Education Board. (2024, April). *Introduction to Stronger by Design*. Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions Victoria. <https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-04/Fact-Sheet-Stronger-by-Design-.pdf>

Get in touch

Social Equity Research Centre

School of Global, Urban and Social Studies
RMIT University
360 Swanston Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

E serc@rmit.edu.au