The Smith Family

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Our Digital Future

Submission to the Tasmanian Government consultation

May 2025

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Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide a short response to the Tasmanian Government's consultation paper **Our Digital Future**. We share the Government's view that there are both **opportunities** and **challenges** inherent in the rapid digital transformation which is impacting so many dimensions of Tasmanians' lives – including economically, socially and culturally. Maximising the benefits and reducing the challenges of this transformation - particularly from an **equity** perspective – will require coordinated and sustained collaborative efforts across Government, business and the community.

The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity which has supported Australian **children and families experiencing disadvantage** for more than a century. Our **vision** is a world where every child has the opportunity to change their future. Our **belief** is that education is one of the world's most powerful change agents and our **purpose** is to overcome educational inequality caused by poverty.

We take a place-based approach and are currently working in 91 low socio-economic communities nationally. This includes in the south of **Tasmania** from Moonah through to Brighton, in the north around North-East Launceston to Georgetown and in the North-West in Burnie, Wynyard, Ulverstone and Penguin.

The Smith Family annually supports more than **220,600** children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals nationally, through our education-focused programs, including over **9,300** in Tasmania. The latter includes over **4,200** students on our long-term educational scholarship program, ***Learning for Life*** *(LfL).*

The *Learning for Life* program is a **targeted early intervention** program with students recruited in primary school and able to stay on the program through secondary school. Students in receipt of the scholarship are likely to struggle to achieve educationally without support, as shown by the profile of students on the program in **Tasmania:**

- All are **financially disadvantaged**, as evidenced by having a Health Care Card or Pensioner Benefit Card.
- 28 percent are from an **Aboriginal** and/or Torres Strait Islander background.
- **49 percent** of *LfL* students and 44 percent of their primary carers have a **health** or **disability** issue.
- The parent/carer of around 68 percent of students are **not in** paid **employment.**

Particularly relevant to this submission, is the fact that around **30 percent** of *LfL* students in Tasmania are not **digitally included** – that is, they do not have a computer or laptop that is connected to the internet at home.

Our organisational context also includes membership of the **Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance** (ADIA) as well as being a referring organisation for the Australian Government's **School Student Broadband Initiative** (SSBI).

Digital Inclusion is essential for economic and social participation

The Smith Family is very cognisant of the impact on young people's **educational and post-school outcomes** of digital exclusion. The OECD's Learning Framework 2030 cites digital literacy as a **core competency** for future education.[1] The OECD's 2023 *Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People* emphasises the importance of enabling young people to participate in an increasingly digitalised world and the need to:

- Equip young people with **digital skills** and problem-solving skills for the digital environment.
- Empower young people to engage **safely, healthily and responsibly** in the digital environment.[2]

As part of The Smith Family's current multi-year organisational Strategy, we have identified ensuring all *Learning for Life* students are digitally included as a key priority. Our ***Digital Learning Essentials*** program aims to bridge the digital divide for *LfL* students by providing them with:

- A refurbished laptop
- Regular home internet access
- Support to develop digital literacy and online safety skills for both students and their parent/carers.

Over the last three years almost **400** Tasmanian *Learning for Life* students have been provided with a Digital Learning Essentials pack. A key aspect of the **impact** of the Digital Learning Essentials approach is that it is administered within the context of The Smith Family's long-standing **relationships** with low-income families. This means that families in need of digital support can be relatively easily identified, ensuring a **targeted** approach and increases the likelihood of program **take up**, given the long-standing trusting relationships families have with The Smith Family.

Tasmanian students have also benefited from a partnership between The Smith Family and the **Tasmanian Community Fund** that has provided a Digital Inclusion pack to a further more than 400 students over the past four years to enable them to participate in online education programs from their home. This program also provides a refurbished laptop, internet access and digital coaching tailored to the needs of the family and their child.

Some considerations for the refresh of Our Digital Future

NAPLAN ICT results

Participation in **school and tertiary education** in Australia today now pre-supposes **access** to technology and the development over time of the **skills** required to safely and effectively use this technology. These skills are also a pre-requisite for participation in the 21st century economy. The Smith Family sees the objective in Our Digital Future around **building digital skills** and inspiring the **next generation** as particularly critical. As the Consultation paper notes,

[1] OECD 2018 *The Future of Education and Skills 2030* https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/future-of-education-and-skills-2030.html

[2] OECD 2023 *Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People* https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0474

one of the barriers to development and adoption of digital transformation is a 'lack of digital skills'.

The most recent ICT NAPLAN data for students in Years 6 or 10[3] (2022), shows the extent of the challenge to ensure young Tasmanians have "the ability to use ICT appropriately and safely to access, manage and evaluate information; develop new understandings; apply computational, design and systems thinking to create solutions; communicate and collaborate with others; and engage productively with emerging and future technologies".

Only **49 percent** of all Year 6 Tasmanian students met the national ICT proficiency standard in 2022 and this rate has been stagnant since 2005. In Year 10, only **31 percent** of Tasmanian students met the proficiency standard. The NAPLAN ICT data is not broken down by **socioeconomic** background at a state level, but the national data highlights there are clear **gaps** in achievement between students of advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. This suggests that the proportions of low socioeconomic background students achieving the proficiency standards in Tasmania are likely to be even lower than for the whole student population.

Participation in **senior secondary** education in Tasmania is particularly reliant on digital inclusion, to enable students to have **choices** around the subjects they study and the **location** where they study. Some schools where The Smith Family works for example, are 'extension schools' for Years 11 and 12, however there are very limited subject choices which could be, at least in part, addressed if there were higher levels of digital inclusion amongst students, and associated digital competence and confidence amongst teaching staff.

Given the goals of the Tasmanian Government's digital strategy, supporting more young Tasmanians, particularly those experiencing disadvantage to develop digital skills, must be a key priority.

Recent digital inclusion research to inform Our Digital Future

Recent national research with low income families[4], in which The Smith Family was a partner, can help inform the ongoing development of the Our Digital Future strategy. The research shows that low income families consider digital devices and connections as **essential**, including for education and life-long learning, but **affordability** is a major issue.

Low income families are often choosing between digital connections and other essentials such as groceries. Household access to technology for these families is **often insufficient** for family needs, especially where there are multiple children. Families often experience **data poverty**. Many of the families in the research were mobile-only and chose pre-paid plans due to their flexibility, even though these often cost the family more when compared to fixed line connections.

Research participants indicated that there is great variation in how **schools** provide technology for classroom use and how digital skills are taught, with significant **impacts on the learning outcomes** of low-income students. Australian data from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that 16 percent of students experiencing disadvantage attended schools where their principal indicated that **learning was hindered by**

[3] Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2023), NAP–ICT Literacy 2022 Public Report, ACARA, Sydney.
[4] Dezuanni, M., Osman, K., Foth, M., Kennedy, J., Marshall, A., McCosker, A., Mitchell, P., Notley, T., Mamalipurath, J., Mavoa, J. and Tucker, J. (2022). Advancing digital inclusion in low income Australian families: Interim findings report. QUT, Brisbane, Australia.

a lack of digital resources. This compares to only five percent of students from advantaged backgrounds.

The national research with low-income families included a specific focus on the Greater Hobart community and may be of value to this consultation process (see https://apo.org.au/node/324666).

Digital literacy/skills development

As well as highlighting the ongoing need for access and affordability measures for low-income families, the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) emphasises the need to increase **digital ability**. This is the component of the ADII where **Tasmanians scored lowest**[5], with the report particularly highlighting that skills must keep up with **changing technologies** and applications, for example Artificial Intelligence.

The ongoing process of obtaining digital skills requires continual learning and cannot be resolved by a one-off training course or assistance. Building a basis of **confidence** around digital ability and encouraging constant learning is key. Parents of school aged children recently reflected this to us in consultations, providing examples of maintaining skills to ensure they could access the apps utilised by schools. Research further supports confidence as key in building digital skills[6].

The opportunities and challenges of AI

Recent work by Professor Lesley Loble and Dr Kelly Stephens[7] on **digital equity in education**, particularly as it relates to AI, is of significant relevance to the ongoing development of the Tasmanian Government's strategy for digital transformation.

Their work notes:

> Digital literacy is a critical foundation for teachers' effective use of digital resources, including AI-enabled edtech, in the classroom. The expectation that teachers use information and communication technologies as part of their teaching toolkit was encoded in the Australian Teaching Standards over a decade ago, but the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey in 2018 found **that only two in five Australian teachers felt well prepared or better to use information and communication technologies for teaching** (Mitchell Institute 2020).
>
> The acceleration of artificial intelligence and generative AI in particular has underscored the **nexus of risk and potential in edtech**. A knowledge-rich curriculum, expertly delivered, is the mainstay of strong student outcomes. As edtech is increasingly a powerful mediator of the curriculum in classroom teaching and at home, it becomes a potentially **high-leverage but also high-stakes intervention** in this arena.

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[5] The three dimensions of the ADII are Access, Affordability and Digital Ability, see Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Holcombe-James, I., Ormond-Parker, L., & Ganley, L. (2023). Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra.

[6] Dezuanni, M., Osman, K., Foth, M., Kennedy, J., Marshall, A., McCosker, A., Mitchell, P., Notley, T., Mamalipurath, J., Mavoa, J. and Tucker, J. (2022). Advancing digital inclusion in low income Australian families: Interim findings report. QUT, Brisbane, Australia.

[7] Loble L and Stephens K (2024) Securing digital equity in Australian education, University of Technology Sydney, doi:10.57956/rrpc-5708

The risks of AI and edtech are not borne equally by students and schools. All the risks, if realised, will **amplify existing disadvantage**, including and especially the risk of doing nothing to address the equity dimensions.

Media literacy/safety

In addition to, and complementing digital skills, The Smith Family would emphasise the importance of **media literacy/safety** as part of ongoing work in Tasmania in the digital transformation space. While cognisant of the opportunities provided by technology, ADIA has noted 62% of Australians don't feel confident they could identify a scam online, and half are worried scams are becoming harder to spot.[8] Meanwhile, almost 90% of adults made a recent decision based on an online source, and about half recently encountered false or misleading online information.[9]

Further, young people are most likely to learn online safety on their own, either by themselves or from the internet, with most young people attributing their online safety skills to personal experience.[10] This data highlights the need to support Tasmanians, including younger Tasmanians, to develop skills which will allow them to critically analyse digital information and services.

Supporting increased digital inclusion for young Australians and low income families

The Smith Family holds that increasing the digital inclusion of young Tasmanians experiencing disadvantage and low income families more broadly, should be a key focus of the ongoing refinement of the Our Digital Future strategy. Achieving this will require a range of approaches and initiatives. The Smith Family is supportive of the following recommendations which draw on our research and practice experience and our membership of, and collaboration with, a range of relevant organisations:

- Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance's position that **incentivising device re-use** within both the Tasmanian Government and corporate sectors offers significant opportunities to address the challenge of digital exclusion experienced by many young people living in low-income families. This would also bring significant environmental benefits.
- WorkVentures' call for a **strategy on devices**, including a National Device Bank. We welcome the NSW Government's recent announcement that they will work with industry to pilot a NSW Device Bank to refurbish Government laptops for use by disadvantaged families and individuals. We would encourage the Tasmanian Government to both track progress and learnings from this pilot and consider pursuing a similar arrangement.
- **Targeted investment** by the Tasmanian Government to increase the **digital inclusion** of young people experiencing disadvantage. The Smith Family's experience through leveraging our strong cross-sectoral partnerships across the digital ecosystem, is that targeted and cost-effective Digital Inclusion initiatives can be delivered at a modest cost.
- ADIA's work in developing a **Digital Capability Framework**. This will allow a coordinated approach – both nationally and at a state level - to how organisations tailor support programs to build digital capability. As services increasingly go online,

[8] Australian Attitudes to Getting Online, Good Things Australia, 2024:https://goodthingsaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Aus-Attitudes-to-Getting-Online-Report-2024-.pdf
[9] Adult Media Literacy in 2024: Australian Attitudes, Experiences And Needs, Australian Media Literacy Alliance, 2024: https://medialiteracy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/AML2024_report_final-compressed.pdf
[10] Improving Digital Financial Literacy Through Public-Private Initiatives, Central Queensland University, 2023: https://www.globalvoices.org.au/post/improving-digital-financial-literacy-through-public-private-initiatives

the Framework will provide common language to ensure online services are mapped with minimum capabilities in mind.

- ADIA's call for a coordinated approach across digital ability, making a link with **media literacy** to emphasise the delivery of key skills that empower people to engage appropriately and with confidence in the online environment.
- The Smith Family supports the approach of an **omni-channel service delivery** and ensuring that online services are accessible and easy to use. Omni-channel service delivery is a crucial consideration for government services to ensure access for all members of the community, regardless of their digital literacy or access levels. Our own approach to assisting families to access information aligns with this and we frequently test changes with families to ensure it is user-friendly and use phone support to build skills by explaining and demonstrating how to access services through our portal. Providing digital support often requires tailoring to the individual at a point in time, recognising their circumstances and challenges.
- Professor Loble's recommendations to:
  - Establish a **Digital Equity Learning Guarantee** for all students that will provide free or low cost access to quality digital devices and connectivity to support disadvantaged students' learning, and additional resources to lift digital skills and AI literacy.
  - Expand the **safe and effective use of digital teaching and learning tools**, especially to improve outcomes for disadvantaged and special needs students, through professional learning opportunities and preservice teacher education.
- **System/service Fragmentation** - Our experience and that of other ADIA members is that while there are many positive initiatives and demonstrated successes, the ecosystem is fragmented, with inefficiency, duplication and gaps in service delivery. The Tasmanian Government has a critical role to play in supporting a stronger digital ecosystem. This will contribute to ensuring effort is effective, efficient, and equitable and that it draws on evidence around what does and does not work in this space.

Conclusion

Australia and Tasmania's digital ecosystem is dynamic and includes Governments, not-for-profits, businesses, academics and community organisations. The Smith Family is working across sectors to achieve our goal of ensuring all students we support on the *Learning for Life* program are digitally included.

Given the significant digital challenge facing Tasmania and while noting the range of initiatives underway, The Smith Family believes the above recommendations are required to make greater and more rapid progress on enhancing digital inclusion for low-income children, young people and families. This in turn will have flow on effects to the supply pipeline that the Consultation Paper notes. We look forward to continuing to work with the Tasmanian Government to realise the benefits of digital inclusion for all Tasmanians.