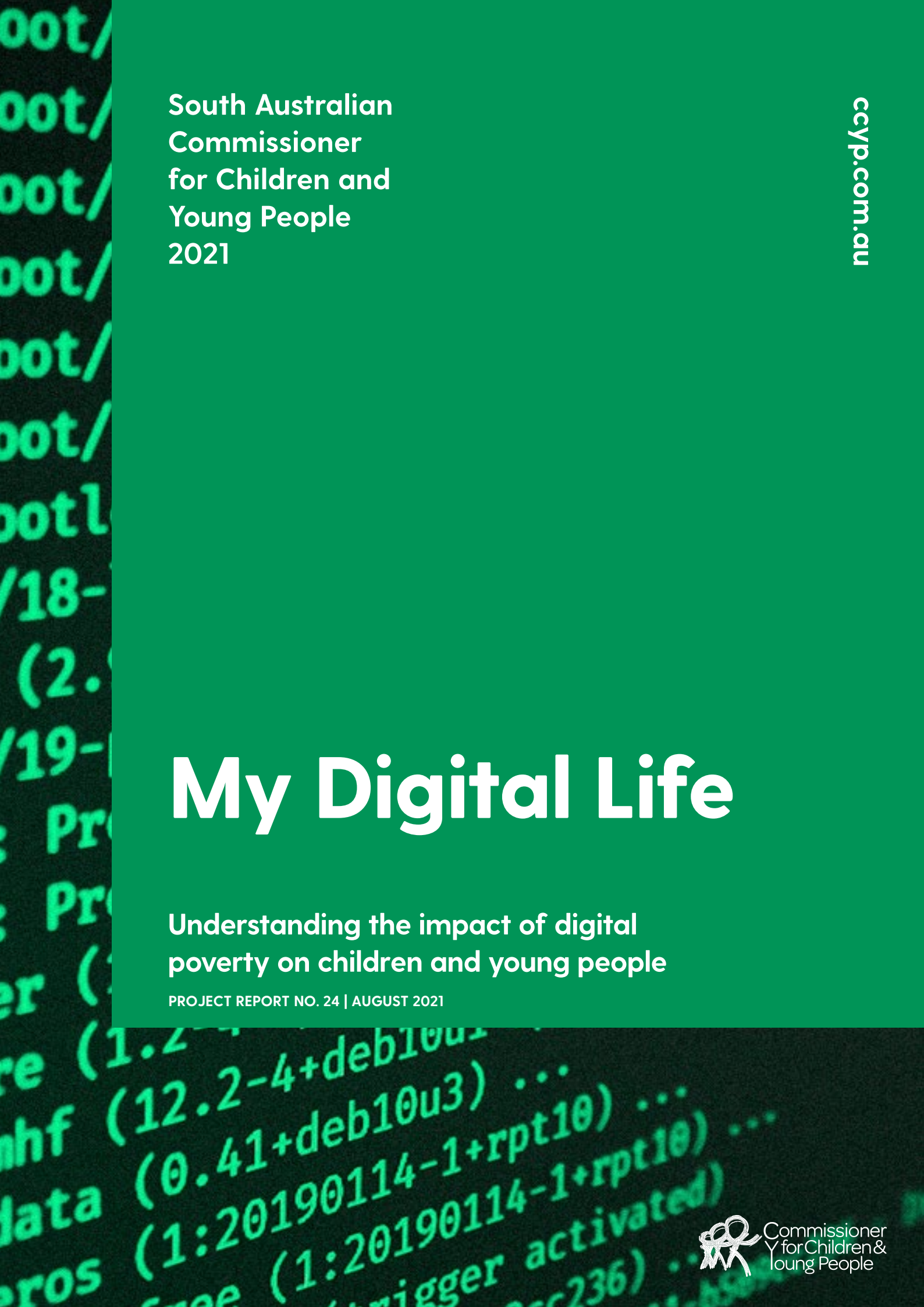
South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People 2021

ccyp.com.au

My Digital Life

Understanding the impact of digital poverty on children and young people

PROJECT REPORT NO. 24 | AUGUST 2021



Commissioner for Children & Young People

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the South Australian children and young people who informed this report and guided the research, analysis and recommendations it makes.

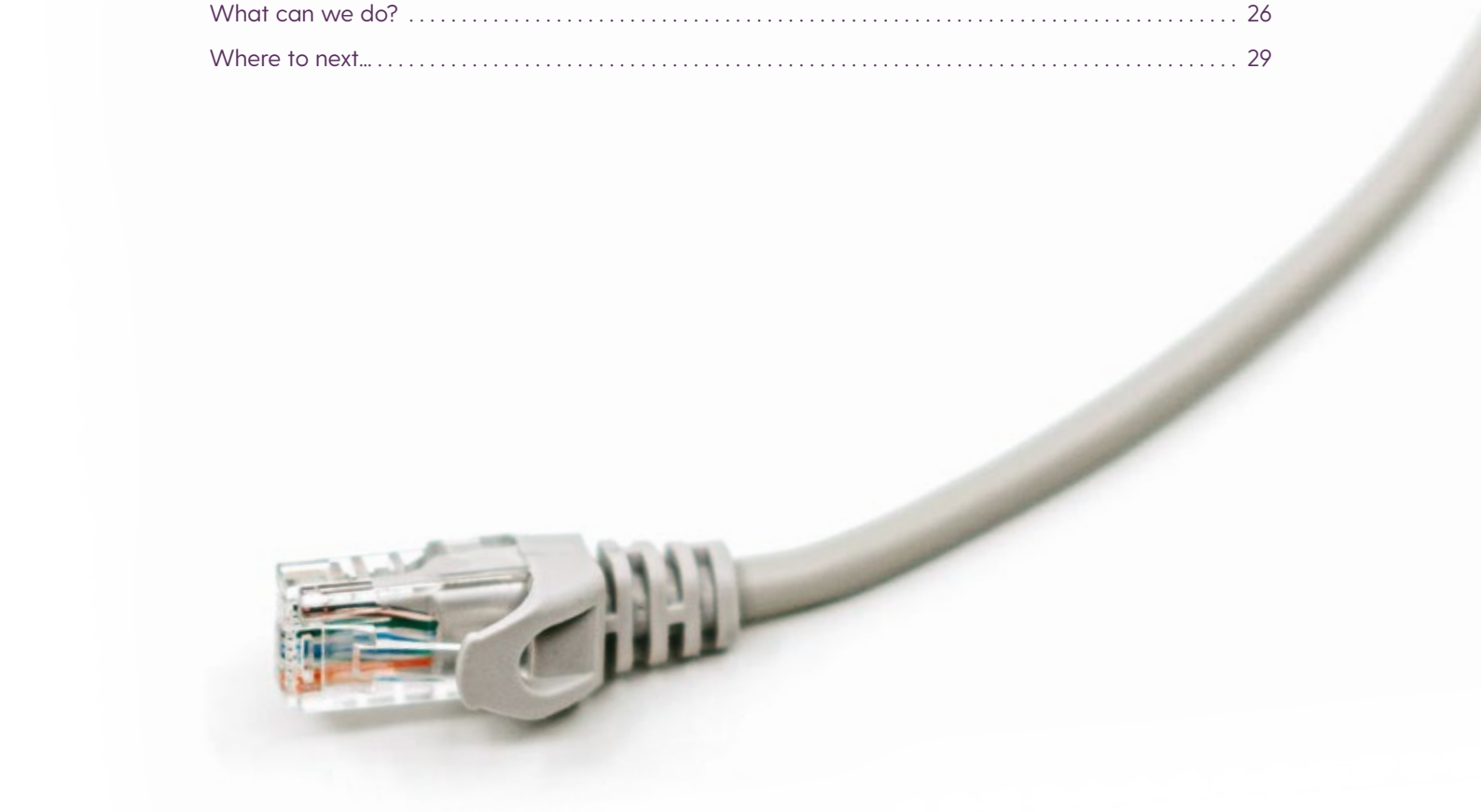
Throughout this report unedited quotes and responses from children and young people have been used to ensure their ideas and suggestions are faithfully communicated.

Suggested Citation

Connolly, H. Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia (2021)
My Digital Life: Understanding the impact of digital poverty on children and young people

ISBN 978-0-6488383-5-7 **ISSN** 2653-1992 (Online)

Contents



Commissioner's Foreword

Although the online world was created by adults for adults, the reality is that one in three internet users is a child or young person.

Whether or not they personally use technology, all children and young people are being affected by it. There is now a digital aspect to almost every process or system being used by governments, businesses, and service providers, to allocate resources and provide services. This includes all those relating to children and young people across education, health, play, and recreation.

Although adult decision makers and policymakers speak of a 'digital divide' to describe the differing circumstances of people's involvement with digital technology, the reality for children and young people is that access to digital devices and data is much more complex and diverse than the notion of what a 'divide' implies.

Rather than reflecting a simple division between the 'haves' and 'have-nots', children and young people's levels of access fall within a diverse spectrum ranging from having no digital access at all to having partial or full access at all times.

For some children, their experience of digital poverty may be brief. For others it is intermittent. For another group of children, digital poverty is a persistent condition they are forced to face throughout their lives.

Digital access and digital skills are often framed as being key to a child or young person's 'successful future', particularly in the important areas of education and employment. Yet, in reality, the digital world is just one more place that children and young people frequent each day, as both young citizens and as child rights holders.

We know from extensive consultation with young people that they don't make a hard and fast distinction between what bits of their lives are online and offline. They describe 'technology' as a 'part of life now'; the way they connect to the people and places they care about, the services they need, and their worlds of learning, earning, and play.

Many young people describe digital access as being just as 'important' as access to transport and electricity, and to having 'digital skills' as being as 'basic' a requirement as 'reading and writing'.

However children and young people rarely have the opportunity to share their everyday experiences of digital access - be it inclusion or exclusion - to inform decision making and policy making.

The shift to a predominantly online existence in 2020, as a result of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighted the issue of digital inequality across our communities, it also exposed the multiple impact a lack of digital access has on children and young people, particularly in relation to their capacity to engage in their education.[1]

Young people reported that digital access was central to how they coped, accessed information, and stayed connected with others and their learning. As their social outlets moved online, those without stable digital access were severely disadvantaged.

Young people who had limited or no digital access spoke about a lack of resources and the challenges of sharing laptops with others, or of buying a laptop and other supplies to work or learn from home. Many talked about the difficulty of having to share an unstable internet connection with several others in a household, and the impact this had on their schooling. Some described being unable to complete tests or tasks at home, as well as being unable to access libraries, or other places they would usually go to access computers and Wi-Fi.

The lockdowns also exposed the extent to which many children and young people require access to public Wi-Fi through schools, libraries, McDonalds, and other public spaces. This public provision enables them to receive information, remain on track with their education, participate in social activities, and gain access to services. Without access to critical digital infrastructure in these safe physical community spaces, many were unable to connect, receive information, and participate socially and economically over long periods.

This report is the culmination of hundreds of offline conversations and polls, interactive workshops, and online surveys, where I have heard about South Australian children and young people's relationship with technology, including their experiences of digital poverty, which for some is the reality of their day-to-day lives.

As all levels of government, business, and service providers across the country begin to adopt what is commonly referred to as a 'digital first policy' there is a no more important time than now to bring the voices and experiences of children and young people to the discussion.

Organisations are actively transferring some parts of their face-to-face services onto a website or smart phone app. The business case for doing so is based on the belief that customers will prefer this. These strategies run on the assumption that customers, clients, or users, including children and young people, will find this easier and more convenient than a shopfront, phone or face to face interaction.

The views of young people challenge many of these assumptions. Young people have said loud and clear that not everything needs to be online, and they often want face to face customer service, especially at critical junctures such as getting a driver's licence or opening a bank account.

Unfortunately, without the provision of offline services of equal quality, these digital first strategies will inadvertently leave some young people behind. For those young people with no or partial access, these digital barriers will impact on their ability to be fully participating citizens, as they continue to navigate an increasingly complex and ever-changing world.

Rather than defaulting to a digital first strategy, policy makers and others who may be making assumptions about children and young people and technology, must first examine their digital lives to understand their day-to-day experiences. This includes their capacity or lack thereof to access devices and data. It involves knowing what, how, when, and where children and young people use digital technology and being committed to finding out what they see as being the most significant barriers to its access and use.

Given the disproportionate, significant, and multi-dimensional impact of digital exclusion on children and young people, a targeted digital inclusion strategy focused on their needs is what is required.

Such a digital inclusion strategy must feature equal access to digital devices, data, and storage as key components, alongside digital literacy and digital citizenship. If twenty-first century children are to achieve their life outcomes, then being connected to people, places and opportunities, and being confident and equipped with the digital skills they'll need to achieve this, is now essential.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children and Young People

'Stop pushing everything online. Remind us we need life skills like writing, being able to use a recipe book, etc.'

- 17 year old

Digital Context

South Australian children and young people have been born into a century characterised by rapid and unprecedented civic, social, technological, environmental, and political change.

They have grown up in a world where their ability to maintain relationships, to be engaged in their education and communities, to access services, information, and future study or employment opportunities, depends largely on their digital access.

Children and young people today are global citizens whose relationships and the issues they care about, cross continents, sovereignties, and ideological lines. They both, literally and figuratively, see the world differently than previous generations, and consequently have different expectations.

One of these expectations is for reliable access to digital devices, data, and associated services. Digital access is increasingly seen as an 'essential' utility that we rely upon with the same predictability as electricity, clean water, and effective sewage systems. Public health policy in many jurisdictions nationally and globally, including in South Australia, is increasingly recognising digital inclusion as a social determinant of health.

As such, digital access is a means of realising fundamental rights set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), including the rights of all children to a quality education (Articles 28 and 29) healthcare (Article 24), information (Article 13), play (Article 31) and participation in decisions that affect their lives (Article 12). It is also central to safety, citizenship and social and economic participation in work, education, and the community.

However, digital access and digital inclusion are not shared by all children and young people across South Australia. Digital access and digital skill levels are domains where a wide divide exists between children and young people from different social and economic backgrounds. This divide ranges from those who have no digital access, or partial or interrupted access, to those who have full access.

South Australia is the second lowest digitally inclusive state or territory across the three measures of the Australian Digital Inclusion Index: Access, Affordability and Ability[2]. Data from the most recent Census highlighted that South Australian students generally face higher levels of social and digital exclusion compared to other Australian students, with an estimated 6% of public school students without internet access at home[3].

Although these issues long pre-date the Covid-19 pandemic, the global pivot to online learning, communications, and relationships during 2020, exposed high levels of digital exclusion within and across local communities. All levels of government are increasingly recognising systemic issues related to digital poverty, exclusion and inequality – commonly referred as a 'digital divide' – as a key part of their Covid-19 crisis and recovery response.

Yet the way in which children and young people experience digital poverty can be especially difficult to understand. Children and young people are often only considered in the context of being part of a family, rather than as an individual whose everyday life is affected in myriad ways by digital technology.

Further, much of the adult commentary about children and young people's relationships with digital technology assumes ubiquitous access to devices and data insofar as it centres on their safety and behaviours online. The tendency to describe children and young people as 'digital natives' or 'pioneers' further perpetuates these assumptions.

Across the media, education, and policymaking spheres, conversations focus primarily on keeping children offline, reducing their exposure to technology, and monitoring children's use. While all these conversations are worthy of attention, the underlying assumptions being made about children and young people's digital access and level of digital skill, can inadvertently leave those without reliable digital access well behind and increasingly invisible.

Breaking down barriers to digital inclusion, therefore, requires a deeper understanding of the importance of digital access to children and young people's lives; what devices and data children and young people use, how they use it, what issues they face, and with an emphasis on everyday issues of reliability and consistency of their digital access.

It is important to hear firsthand from children and young people from a variety of backgrounds, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, those with caring responsibilities, LGBTQIA+ young people, children and young people with a disability, and children and young people living in regional and remote communities.

Young people have nuanced views about both the benefits and negative aspects of growing up in a world that 'requires technology more than ever'. They highlight how different their experiences are to previous generations, and that often this is oversimplified with an almost exclusive focus on the 'negatives'.

For many young people, being connected digitally is a 'way to escape', 'share interests' and 'make important friendships', particularly for those who 'feel like they don't belong in real life'. Some young people describe being closer to friends who live interstate or overseas who they participate in online gaming with, than with peers in their classroom or school yard.

> *'I feel like adults are always putting down young people for using technology but if they had technology when they were our age, they would have used it too. Technology has become a much more important thing in society, and we are using it for many more things.' (16 year old)*

When asked what they wish adults understood about their relationship with technology, children and young people emphasised that 'we aren't all obsessed'. They describe a very real 'extra pressure to be in the know', and they don't want their use of technology to come at the expense of being active and connected to people and places in their communities. In many cases, they say their experiences online often strengthen or shape their face-to-face connections and offline activities.

> *'Technology is not the problem ... it's the way you use it, and technology can help kids get ready for the future' (18 year old)*

> *'We get information + news about things that happens everywhere. Just like they do with the news. It informs us of stuff we never knew about, so we can help change it. It helps us make more connections with others who like the same stuff as us. Not everyone we meet online are pretending to be someone else (eg. pedefiles, groomers, sex trafficers)' (16 year old)*

Above all, children and young people recognise that the benefits of the digital world are not available to everyone equally, and that equality of access does not translate into equality of opportunity. They want everyone, regardless of who they are, to be supported with access, opportunities, and skills to navigate the digital world confidently, so that no one is 'left out' or 'left behind'.

'While the Internet and technology can have its faults, it does allow people to stay connected with each other, so it is important definitely if they live far away from others.'

–18 year old

Digital Poverty

Digital access and digital inclusion enable children and young people to fully participate in society as active and engaged citizens, who have the ability to tap into vast amounts of information and entertainment.

This access covers all aspects of their complex and busy lives. It includes learning, working, volunteering, travelling, gaming, having fun, and maintaining social connections to family, friends, team-mates, work mates and school peers. It also allows children and young people to do things often described as 'life admin', like internet banking, making medical and self-care appointments, paying bills, interacting with state and federal government agencies for services and support, or simply shopping online ordering food to be delivered.

The factors surrounding children and young people's experience of digital poverty varies according to their age, the size and socioeconomic status of their family, where they live, and their access to helpful adults who have time and expertise to help them navigate the digital world.

More than one in six South Australian children are on the most excluded quartile of the Child Social Exclusion Index, and in some areas of the state more than 50% of children and young people are living in poverty[4]. The 2016 Census data identified that South Australian students are generally more disadvantaged than other Australian students, with an estimated 6% without internet access at home.

These figures represent thousands of South Australian children who may be doing it tough and facing barriers to digital access. But these figures do not capture the reality of their day-to-day experiences of digital poverty.

A significant number of children and young people live without regular access to a device, data, or Wi-Fi with which to connect to the Internet. Many of these young people may share limited devices and data with others in their household whose digital connection may be prioritised. This leaves the child or young person with limited data or time on a device to do their homework, connect socially, access online services, or complete other 'life admin' tasks.

Other young people may have their own device but may regularly run out of data or credit due to its cost, or be unable to afford the software their school or workplace expects of them. Others may live in areas with poor mobile phone reception or internet connection. Many of these children and young people rely on free public Wi-Fi networks or digital infrastructure in schools, libraries, and other community spaces to connect.

Disparities relate as much to the quality and cost of connection as to the availability of connection, with research suggesting that issues of access and affordability affect what children and young people can do[5].

The inability of some children to have the same access as others to digital technology is increasingly an issue of systemic discrimination. Digital exclusion and social exclusion are connected, with growing recognition of the risk that the increasing importance of digital inclusion may deepen inequality and exacerbate the lived experience of poverty.

Children and young people living in families with lower incomes, insecure and unstable employment, or from larger families and intergenerational households, are much more likely to experience digital poverty. Others may be moving through placements in the child protection system or coming into contact with the youth justice system, and may be disproportionately impacted by unequal access to digital technology and associated opportunities.

Many children and young people living in regional and remote areas may live in places where there is poor or no internet reception at all. This can be further exacerbated by limited free public Wi-Fi and limited transport to independently access digital infrastructure made available in community facilities.

- *'I live in a rural area and there is pretty bad connection.' (15 year old)*
- *'We don't have best internet; we live a bit out of town' (16 year old)*
- *'We have no choice these days but to use technology - everything is on it. I understand spending too much time on the phone, but we have to know how to use other technologies. The world is run by technology these days. It is important to know how to use devices. However, this should not control our lives, we should be able to make connections without devices.' (18 year old)*

Key Messages

Understanding the nuances and complexity of young people's experiences provides insight into where we need to focus efforts to minimise the impact of digital poverty, and instead build a digitally inclusive South Australia.

Our future policy and strategies must take a comprehensive and targeted approach that accounts for the social, cultural, educational, and economic aspects of digital technology in children and young people's everyday lives, and do this by:

- Providing all children and young people, across preschools and schools, regardless of background and ability, access to digital devices and data, along with opportunities to learn digital literacy skills
- Considering the everyday experiences of issues related to digital poverty from a child rights perspective, recognising that children's rights exist equally online as they do offline, and that digital inclusion is about building communities where everyone can realise their fundamental rights, regardless of circumstance or geography
- Addressing both the 'access' and 'opportunity' divide, through strategies to create and grow opportunities for learning, participation, creativity, and digital citizenship, while also protecting children from the risks that being online exposes them to; and
- Supporting children and young people with the digital tools they need to access government, health, and other services, apply for jobs, complete homework assignments, and stay connected to friends and community.

> *Young people are the future and are living in a unique, new time, so you can't just take the perspective of parents as every experience is different.' (18 year old)*

> *'We are the young people that is either experiencing it in everyday life, being a part of that family, or we will have our own family in that situation in years to come. It is either our reality or our future depending on what changes are made. so of course we would like to be listened to.' (15 year old)*

Recommendations

South Australia needs a comprehensive digital poverty agenda that includes:

1

Establishment of a Digital Inclusion Task Force to explore innovative strategies from around the world to increase access to data for all children and young people.

2

Expansion of free public Wi-Fi networks to all public buildings, public transport, and community infrastructure.

3

Provision of free laptop and data packs for all School Card holders.

4

Review of SA Government Digital First strategies that impact on children and young people, to ensure provision of equal quality non digital service options.

'The world is full of technology and we have to know how to use it, if we want a career in the future.' – *13 year old*

What children and young people told us

Through our regular engagement with children and young people, it is clear their access to devices and to the internet varies according to a complex range of factors. These include their age, where they live, what they study, what their work situation is like, how they connect to the Internet, their family's attitudes, and their financial situation.

In 2020, we sought to better understand children and young people's thoughts about the devices and data they use, how important this is in their lives, how they engage with the digital world, and whether they have any issues accessing the Internet or digital devices.

Over 250 young people aged 10-20 years participated in the Devices, Data and Digital Life Survey, with 161 responding via the paper-based version and 93 completing the survey online. A diverse group of young people from across the state took part, including 10% from an Aboriginal background, 13% from a culturally or linguistically diverse community, 12% who are living with a disability, 5% with caring responsibilities for a family member and 16% who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Most frequent issues with technology:

1 The cost of devices
2 Not having a stable internet connection
3 Feeling unsafe without a phone
4 Limited storage space
5 The cost of connecting to the Internet
6 Sharing a device with others

Of 253 young people who participated in the Commissioner's Devices, Data and Digital Life Survey...

- **77%** said that the cost of devices was always or sometimes a problem.
- **21%** said that limited storage space was always an issue.
- **20%** said they always feel unsafe without a phone, with young women more likely than young men to identify this as an issue.
- **15%** said not having a stable internet connection was always a problem.
- **12%** said the cost of connecting to the Internet was always a problem.
- **10%** said sharing a device with others was always a problem.
- **10%** said unwanted contact from others through technology was always a problem.
- **8%** said not having enough data for homework was always an issue.
- **7%** said access to Wi-Fi at home was always a problem.
- **6%** identified cyberbullying as always a problem.
- **5%** said not having enough data to get shifts for work was always an issue.
- **5%** said not knowing enough about technology was always a problem.

Mobile phones

Mobile phones are the digital device most young people are likely to have, with 91% of those surveyed reporting that they have a mobile phone. However, it is significant that, for whatever reason, the remaining 9% do not have access to a mobile phone.

Of the young people who do have a phone, almost half (45%) reported using it for homework, 7% reported sharing the phone with other people, and almost two thirds (64%) reported having their phone on a prepaid plan. While the majority of young people who have a phone said they use it to connect to the Internet, 3% reported that they don't, suggesting there are significant numbers of young people for whom internet access is not an option.

Desktop computers

Compared to laptops and phones, young people were less likely to report using a desktop computer, reflecting a trend towards greater dependence on mobile devices for internet access. While 40% of young people did report using a desktop computer, two thirds (65%) said that this was shared with others.

Just over half (56%) of those who reported using a desktop computer, use it for homework with almost all within this group (89%) reporting they also use it for other purposes. While most young people reported using the desktop computer to connect to the Internet, 6% did not, again suggesting there are significant numbers of young people for whom an internet connection is not available.

Laptop computers

Access to a laptop or notebook computer was possible for 87% of young people surveyed, with just over half (53%) reporting that their school provided them with their laptop. One in five (21%) of these young people reported that they shared their laptop device with others.

A significant majority (86%) of young people who have a laptop reported that they use it to do homework, making laptops the device most commonly used for homework. While most young people reported they could also use the laptop for other purposes, 4% did not use it to connect to the Internet, again suggesting there are significant numbers of young people for whom internet access is not an option.

Gaming consoles

Almost three quarters of young people (73%) surveyed reported having access to a gaming console, with over half of these young people (61%) sharing this device with at least one other person. Many reported using their console to game with others online, but also said they use it for other activities that depend on a stable internet connection, such as streaming movies, watching YouTube videos, chatting to friends, or listening to music.

Public Wi-Fi Access

Many young South Australians rely on free public Wi-Fi in public shopping centres, fast food outlets and libraries to complete important 'life admin' tasks. These include organising transport, accessing internet banking, taking or swapping shifts at work, completing homework, and booking health or other appointments.

Children and young people describe using public Wi-Fi 'wherever I can'. However, they also talk about 'data dead zones' where there is no public Wi-Fi access. While children and young people living in rural and remote areas are particularly affected by this, there are also numerous 'dead spots' of poor mobile phone reception and connection in metropolitan Adelaide. Where public Wi-Fi is available, it's often not fit for purpose; it's unreliable, slow, and often has poor security, meaning connection to important services such as mobile banking apps is restricted.

> *'There's too many people on it (Adelaide free Wi-Fi) and it crashes – doesn't work well.'*

> *'Limited internet – chews through data – can't afford the data, on computer at home to use Wi-Fi' (15 year old)*

> *'I barely get to connect because it's not near my house.' (14 year old)*

Unreliable Access

Children and young people who reported that their digital access is unreliable, described having internet connections that 'can disconnect regularly', laptops or phones that are 'slow and randomly shut down', devices that have 'low battery', 'poor reception' and 'not enough storage'. Children and young people don't often speak about the 'Internet' per se, just the frustration, barriers, and negative effects of not being able to fully participate online.

Some young people described being 'sometimes' caught out without data, due to forgetting to recharge, while others reported difficulties using devices when they were shared with siblings or other family members.

> *'Sometimes my brother hogs it.' (13 year old)*

Others described difficulties affording resources, completing tests or homework at home due to poor connection, a lack of devices or requirement to share devices with other people in their household. 'Which' devices and data children and young people use, and 'how' they use it, depends largely on their ability to connect to the Internet, and the quality of this connection.

A small percentage (7%) of young people surveyed reported that they do not have Wi-Fi at home. Most of these young people use their mobile phone as a data hotspot, half use public Wi-Fi, and 1 in 10 reported using a dongle.

Affordability

Cost was reported as a common barrier to digital access, with children and young people noting the significant 'setup' as well as 'ongoing costs' of digital devices, but also of credit and data 'recharges' or 'postpaid phones'.

> *'Applied for a laptop with CREATE grant but didn't get approved.' (18 year old)*

Data Use

When asked which activities were most important to them when they have limited data, children and young people prioritised their connections with the people and places they care about: family, friends, and school.

In particular, they talked about staying in contact with family and friends who live interstate and overseas; 'contacting mum and seeing where family is', and 'sharing my interests'. Their responses also highlight how important access to data is for their connection with opportunities and services in their communities - from finding work, to banking, checking emails, and booking appointments.

Top five important things children and young people use their data, devices and access for:

1 Contacting family
2 Doing schoolwork or homework
3 Chatting with friends
4 Applying for jobs
5 Using services/booking appointments

This list above reflects what children and young people reported as being use of their devices and data that are most important to their wellbeing. Learning and finding work were ranked similarly to social connections, highlighting how technology can be an important source of information, connection, fun and entertainment. Young people value 'having Wi-Fi at home' and 'owning your own device', insofar as this supports them to be able to benefit from the fullest possible range of uses and opportunities.

Top five important things to children and young people's wellbeing in relation to digital access:

1 Having Wi-Fi at home
2 Owning your own device
3 Using technology for learning
4 Using technology for social connections
5 Using technology to find work

Impacts of digital poverty on learning

Those who have no, limited, or low-quality digital access, face additional barriers that can negatively impact their education. Being able to afford 'printing money' (money for printing) and having access to the Internet at home, and to digital devices generally - particularly laptops and smartphones - is widely considered to be a 'basic requirement' central to a child or young person's participation in their education.

> *'It puts them behind the 8-ball their whole lives. Not having access to a good education can be detrimental to how the rest of their lives turn out.' (15 year old)*

A lack of reliable digital access has further impacts on disadvantaged young people as poor digital literacy development can create a disparity in employability skills later in life particularly when being compared to peers when compared to peers who have had digital access the whole or majority of their lives.

Starting in early childhood, digital devices are becoming embedded into learning and school. In some cases, the expectation is that even children under five will know how to interact with smart whiteboards, large touch screens, or iPad type devices that log into a digital roll, or record the completion of a learning outcome.

For children who have had no access, and who have not acquired these skills at home, they may be unable to immediately engage with the content, as they must first learn how to use the device. If school is the only place they get to practice on a device, this can impact their enjoyment and learning from an early age as they struggle to keep up with their peers.

As children progress through school, having a laptop, or desktop digital device is even more essential, as it becomes increasingly difficult to log in to school emails, or use Microsoft Office programs like Word or Excel on phones or other mobile devices. For children and young people who only have a mobile device, or whose access to a device is shared with other family members, it is particularly difficult to meet the growing expectations of some peers, teachers, and principals.

> *'No internet at home so can't do homework.' (15 year old)*

> *'School projects are hard, especially ones that require technology.' (21 year old)*

Without adequate access, young people report that it is nearly impossible to complete homework, fully participate in shared projects, communicate with teachers and peers via email, or do any compulsory operating system updates.

Time spent resolving these issues of access is time taken away from engaging in education, leaving some young people further behind their peers. Some young people described their schools' attempts to provide them with access as mostly limited and falling short of being able to bridge the gap to the extent required.

Others described how 'lunchtime classes with technology' contributed to their feelings of 'being punished for being poor' rather than being adequately supported.

> *'While I was video calling with teachers every lesson and being given constant support, my brother's school was struggling to maintain regular contact with their students. Moreover, for some students at his school, they couldn't access the stable internet connection and technological resources my brother and I are lucky enough to have.' (16 year old)*

> *'My mum works at home now and having the both of us on zoom sometimes when I'm in a meeting with my uni, I've found that it isn't that great and the audio isn't too great, and always comes up with 'Poor connection'.' (18 year old)*

Children and young people describe the impact of digital poverty on their school experience as being 'much broader than just on their learning'. They see it as a social issue; one that impacts the way they relate to their peers, how they feel about themselves, and how they connect to their school. It is often the difference between 'fitting in' or 'standing out', and the stigma and embarrassment compounds when you don't have the same confidence or knowledge about how to use technology to the same degree as others do.

> *'It's not technology that give us bad grades and if we don't have a phone you won't really fit in.' (15 year old)*

The impacts of limited access to technology also extend beyond a student's time at school to their transition from school. For example, although students do get to keep devices when they leave school, the Microsoft products, or similar software, is mostly removed. As such, they are left with an outdated device with limited or no software at a time they really need it; to move onto the next part of their lives.

Impacts of digital poverty on participation

Beyond school, children and young people's participation in their community, their social lives, and their pursuit of future work or study opportunities, largely depends on the degree of digital access they have.

Children and young people report that barriers to digital access can make it difficult to find information and services, apply for jobs, and meet entry-level job requirements that relate to knowledge and skills of software and devices. This can really hamper their ability to 'get ahead' and to feel confident about their future.

> *'My grandparents are poor. They struggle to get me what I need like internet access, smart phone and new shoes... my mobile is hand me down and nbn keeps us poor.' (17 year old)*

In most areas of work, young people are expected to have a smartphone and data. For example, in entry level jobs in hospitality and retail, young people are expected to have devices and data for things like accessing and changing rosters, finding people to cover or swap shifts, and receive and respond to compulsory training requirements. This also extends to having the ability to take a photograph of say a piece of broken equipment they must send to their manager to document an incident and receive input for a solution.

In STEM-related fields of work, multiple coding languages are now expected for entry level jobs, and for some potential employers there is an expectation that an employee will have undertaken a professional course at their own expense to meet a particular level of accreditation. In areas such as video production and composing, music production and graphic design, entry level devices are top end Macs and PCs that require significant hard drive capacity to manage large amounts of data. This usually includes an expectation that the young person will be able to access cloud-based software, storage, and file transfer solutions for the benefit of their employer, some of which have costs associated.

For students undertaking internships and work experience opportunities, it may be expected that the young person brings their own laptop, or uses their own mobile data to connect to the Internet to successfully complete assigned internship tasks.

In addition to expectations around access, there is a growing assumption that young people – as 'digital natives' and 'pioneers' – always have the skills and knowledge they need to deal with constant changes in the digital domain. This includes an expectation that young people can teach themselves new software and skills for whatever new area of study or work they find themselves pursuing. In many situations, young people are expected to be the 'go-to people' who help teachers, employers, family members, and others in the community to solve all problems related to devices, software, and apps. As services, work, and workplace training increasingly move online, these assumptions can inadvertently leave those without reliable digital access well behind.

As working from home becomes more prominent in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, some young people are being asked to do so in their very first role. While some young people appreciate this flexibility, others who don't have the right resources and knowledge, may not be successful, thereby impacting their confidence at the very beginning of their professional lives. Worse still they may not even be considered for the roles in the first place.

> *'[The worst thing about being a kid is...] lack of internet and not being able to fix it' (8 year old)*

> *'[If I could make things better for kids, I would...] make internet free and everywhere you can connect to the Internet' (10 year old)*

New business security standards are also emerging, requiring two-factor authentication to access work files and emails. This involves a verification code being sent to a smart phone. So, if you have don't have a smart phone with sufficient data or battery life, you will not be able to access or complete your work.

Being data poor or living in an area with no or poor reception, can really dim down a child or young person's connection to community, and the people they care about. Without a reliable device or connection, children and young people describe feeling 'lost' and 'unsafe'. They may be 'caught out' without money if they cannot access online banking to transfer money from their savings to their spending account. They may not be able to plan their public transport journey without access to bus timetables, or the option to recharge a MetroCard online.

Children and young people's participation in community activities may also be limited without access to information about sport and recreational activities, including details about what opportunities are available, the training and match timetables, and important contact information. All of this can significantly affect their social lives. Some young people surveyed were even describing how they avoid having friends over due to their embarrassment about not having a stable internet connection at home.

Impacts of digital poverty on wellbeing

Beyond the material possession of having a device, children and young people focus on the emotional, relational, and social aspects of digital devices and data.

Being digitally included is about feeling connected and confident. Young people consider mobile phones key to feeling safe in public places. For example, one 13-year-old emphasised that 'we need a phone to call for help'.

Children and young people also talk about the importance of having access to devices and data to 'fit in'. They describe the embarrassment and isolation of having limited, or no access to devices and data as feeling 'left out' and 'out of touch' with other people, but also 'with news, social conventions, and memes' etc. All this impacts on how children and young people see themselves in the present and future, as well as how they relate to others, particularly their peers, family, and teachers, now.

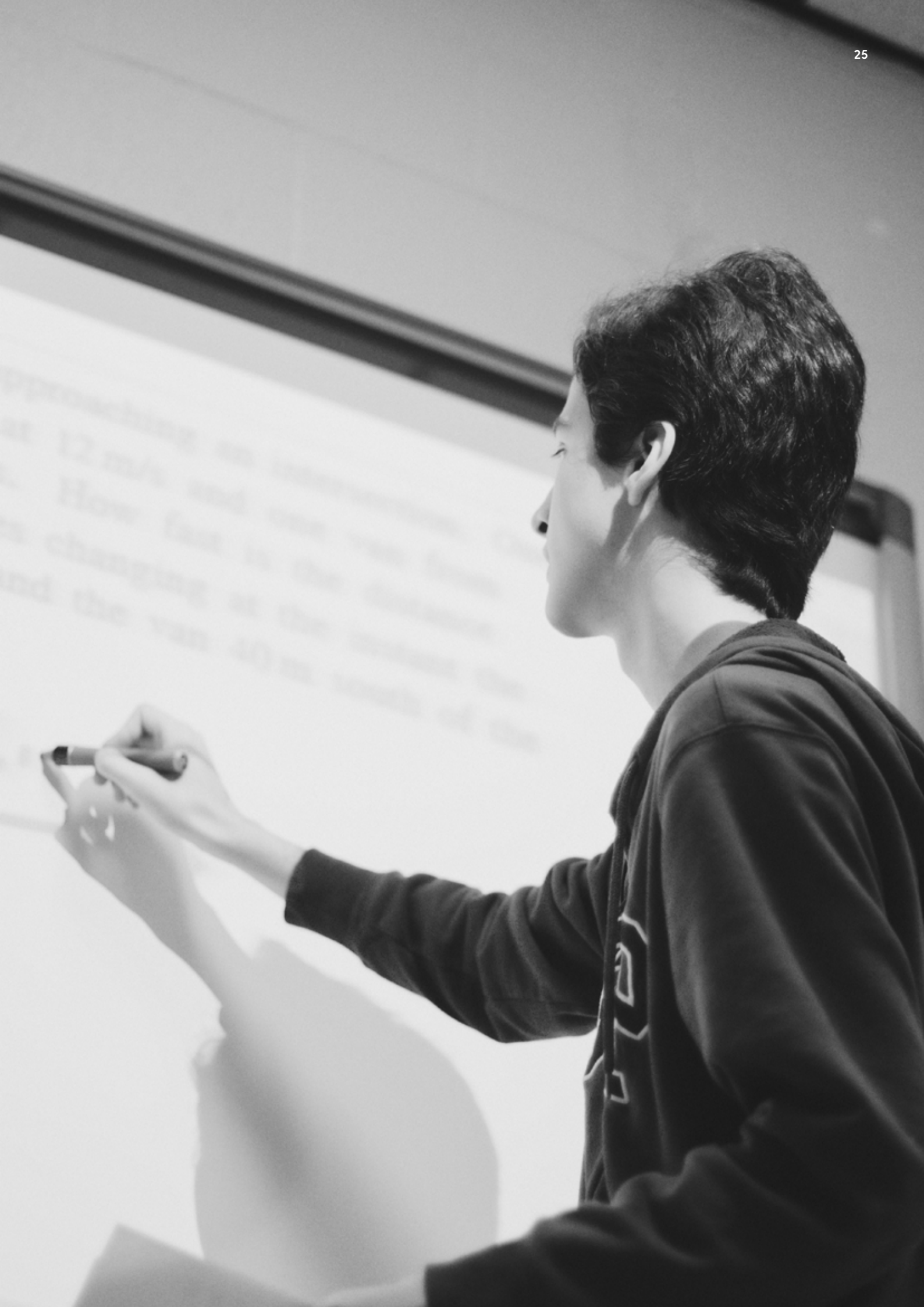
> *'That if someone doesn't have a phone they won't fit in.' (15 year old)*

> *'As well as not living with your proper family you may not have cool toys like the other people around you.' (14 year old)*

When asked what issues they face relating to being digitally connected, young people described 'spending too much time' on their devices, but also 'sometimes not spending enough time on them' and 'missing things' as a result. Children and young people understand the complexity and nuance of this 'pressure' to be digitally connected to 'keep up to date' and 'be in the know'. They do not always see this as a positive. Rather, it is often described as a burden and a challenging part of growing up in a digital world. However, for those without access, or with low quality access, there is no choice to 'turn off'.

Children and young people link digital access to their feelings of preparedness for the future, reporting that a young person with no access to devices or data would be least likely to feel 'up to date with schoolwork', 'confident applying for jobs' or 'connected to others'. They also recognise that limited digital access can be a barrier to accessing community services or activities that are key to positive health and wellbeing, both mental and physical.

'Being poor as a young adult more impacts yourself and future perception. You can see plans you had when you were younger failing, and struggling to find work stops being a smaller annoyance and starts being an existential threat. You feel like you are using up peoples good will to survive but not improve.' *- 17 year old*



What can we do?

Addressing digital poverty means understanding how children and young people use technology as well as what we need to do collectively to make it safe, positive, and equally accessible for everyone, regardless of circumstances or geography.

This also means understanding the needs, aspirations, and fears that children and young people have in relation to their digital lives, including how they define being 'included' online, and conversely what it looks and feels like to be digitally 'excluded'.

Given the wide-ranging impact of digital exclusion on children and young people and their families, it is important that South Australia's future strategies and policies ensure everyone has access to data, devices, and digital skills.

This section presents several ideas on how to reduce or remove the cost of data. They are therefore worthy of further consideration. While these initiatives require varying levels of infrastructure investment, they all require significant collaboration across communities, public and private sectors, and all levels of government.

It is time for leaders across South Australia – in local councils, in state government, and in libraries, shopping centre management authorities, fast food outlets, energy companies, and internet service providers, to name a few – to explore how digital poverty in South Australia can be addressed in a way that suits our state's unique geography, infrastructure, and population.

To be effective and meaningful, it is important that this be done in ways that have been informed by children and young people's voices and rights, and in ways that do not inadvertently exacerbate inequality, compromise their privacy, or raise security concerns.

Given the complexity and diversity of factors underlying digital and data poverty the following suggestions are just some of the possibilities and opportunities that appear to have potential to promote digital inclusion and make connectivity affordable and accessible to everyone across South Australia.

While many of the solutions in this space are technical, equal attention should be given to the relational and social aspects of issues related to digital poverty. This means ensuring a focus on people, places, and communities when seeking solutions. Recent work by the Carnegie UK Trust builds on a growing trend to embed the value of kindness in public policy, to help 'bridge gaps between digital policy, process and practice to improve outcomes'[6].

Recent initiatives to address digital poverty in the UK are recognising that digital access has become a social determinant of health. As part of the NHS' Widening Digital Participation program, community-based 'Digital Health Hubs' have been scaled up after a successful pilot. Based on the principle that 'every village, town and city needs a trusted place to get support with digital inclusion', these hubs can be based in GP practices, libraries, and other community spaces, with the aim of reducing barriers to health services and technology, and as a way of building bridges between community groups and local services[7].

The UK has also established a 'Data Poverty Lab' bringing together people with lived experience of data poverty with innovators across industry who are interested to develop sustainable solutions that will end data poverty, recognising internet access as an essential utility.

There are opportunities for South Australia to build on some of these tested and scalable solutions and to apply a similar framework in key public policy areas and services, thereby preventing digital exclusion from widening other inequalities.

Renewable Wi-Fi?

South Australia is renowned for being a renewable energy powerhouse. The state has established wind, solar, and battery storage at scale. As a result of this investment, 60% of the power generated in South Australia in 2020 came from renewables. The state is predicted to keep building supply capacity to 500% by 2050, with plans to export this supply excess both nationally and internationally. Is there a way South Australia could engineer a solution that uses excess renewable energy to power a free, high quality, state-wide Wi-Fi network to the benefit of young people and communities?

It is also worth exploring other ways local authorities and community organisations and spaces can work together to expand connectivity through free local Wi-Fi networks. This might be done through leveraging existing public Wi-Fi networks, setting up new networks, or incentivising individuals or communities to share their Wi-Fi networks with vulnerable neighbours.

Data gifting

Data donating or data gifting refers to the process by which individual users can donate their unused mobile data for it to be redistributed to others across their community who are unable to afford it. This is currently happening in Australia, with Optus Australia's Donate Your Data Program one of the most widely recognised. In partnership with The Smith Family and other charities, Optus pools data donations and distributes them as an added data boost to 'the young people who need it most'.

In the Netherlands, Vodafone allows users to donate their data, which the telecommunications operator then converts into money that is then transferred to charities. There is potential for these and other such initiatives to be brokered and scaled here in South Australia, particularly in a way that shifts the onus from individuals onto systems and companies. Further consideration is needed to ensure these processes alleviate, rather than inadvertently perpetuate, inequality.

Zero rating

Zero rating – the process of providing subsidised access to an app or service - has the potential to make certain online content, websites, and applications accessible without incurring data charges. Zero rating may be carried out for commercial or charitable reasons. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, some network providers in the UK waived data charges for NHS websites and other sites that were providing financial guidance, health, and emotional support - particularly to vulnerable groups.

Concerns have been raised that zero rating may threaten the principles of 'net neutrality' or 'open internet' – that is, that internet service providers should treat all sites, content, and applications equally, without favouring some sources or blocking others. This is particularly relevant in cases where mobile operators have used a zero rating to attract consumers to their services for commercial reasons. In 2019, a German Court ruled that StreamOn – a content partner of Telekom mobile service – had violated 'net neutrality', with the Court prohibiting this form of zero rating being made available.

Where to next...

The experiences and issues raised by children and young people across South Australia in relation to digital technology highlight the need to ensure everyone has reliable access to digital devices and data.

Limited or no digital access currently presents a significant barrier to education, work, safety, and citizenship. While experiences vary widely across different socioeconomic, cultural, and educational settings, the social and economic benefits of addressing digital poverty are clear and significant.

Given the unique and disproportionate impacts of digital poverty on children and young people, a comprehensive digital poverty agenda specific to the needs of this age-group is urgently needed.

This is everyone's responsibility, and there is a strong need for multi-sector support, collaboration and investment across all levels of government as well as from public and private sectors, communities and service providers.

Given that equality of access does not translate to equality of opportunity, it is clear there is a strong need for education and empowerment to ensure children and young people have the digital skills and digital literacy assumed and expected of them in the twenty-first century.

To adequately provide this, we must both understand the digital life of children and young people, as well as create strategies and solutions that have been co-designed with them. That way we can ensure the issues they face are being adequately addressed in ways they can be confident will work.

Endnotes

1 Connolly, H. CCYP SA, 2020. Reflections on Covid-19: In their own words, South Australian young people reflect on the impact of the coronavirus on their world and their futures. Available at https://www.ccyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Reflections-on-COVID-19-Web.pdf

2 Thomas, J. et al. 2020. Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra. Available at https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2020_WebU.pdf

3 ABS 2016 Census data (2017). Barbara Preston Research, 2020. Digital Inclusion for all public school students. Table 4. Available at http://www.barbarapreston research.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020-BPreston-Digital-inclusion-for-all-public-school-students.pdf

4 Miranti, Riyana et al, 2018. "Child Social Exclusion, Poverty and Disadvantage in Australia," National Centre for Economic Modelling, University of Canberra, p. 32, p. 80-83. In South Australia, 17.3% of children aged 0-14 years are living in poverty (the national average is 17.2%). Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) and University of New South Wales, "Poverty in Australia 2020: Part 2, Who is Affected?" Available at http://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/poverty

5 UNICEF, 2021. Investigating Risks and Opportunities for Children in a Digital World: A Rapid Review of the evidence on children's internet use and outcomes. Available at https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Investigating-Risks-and-Opportunities-for-Children-in-a-Digital-World.pdf

6 CarnegieUK Trust, 2021. Digitally Kind: Bridging the gaps between digital policy, process and practice to improve outcomes. Available at https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-04/apo-nid311910.pdf

7 Emma Stone, Peter Nuckley and Robert Shapiro, 2020. Digital Inclusion in Health and Care: Lessons Learned from the NHS Widening Digital Participation Programme (2017-2020). Available at. https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/digital-participation-lessons-learned/. See also Blueprint for a 100% Digitally Included UK, Available at http://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/blueprint-for-a-100-digitally-included-uk-0.pdf

---

The Commissioner's Role

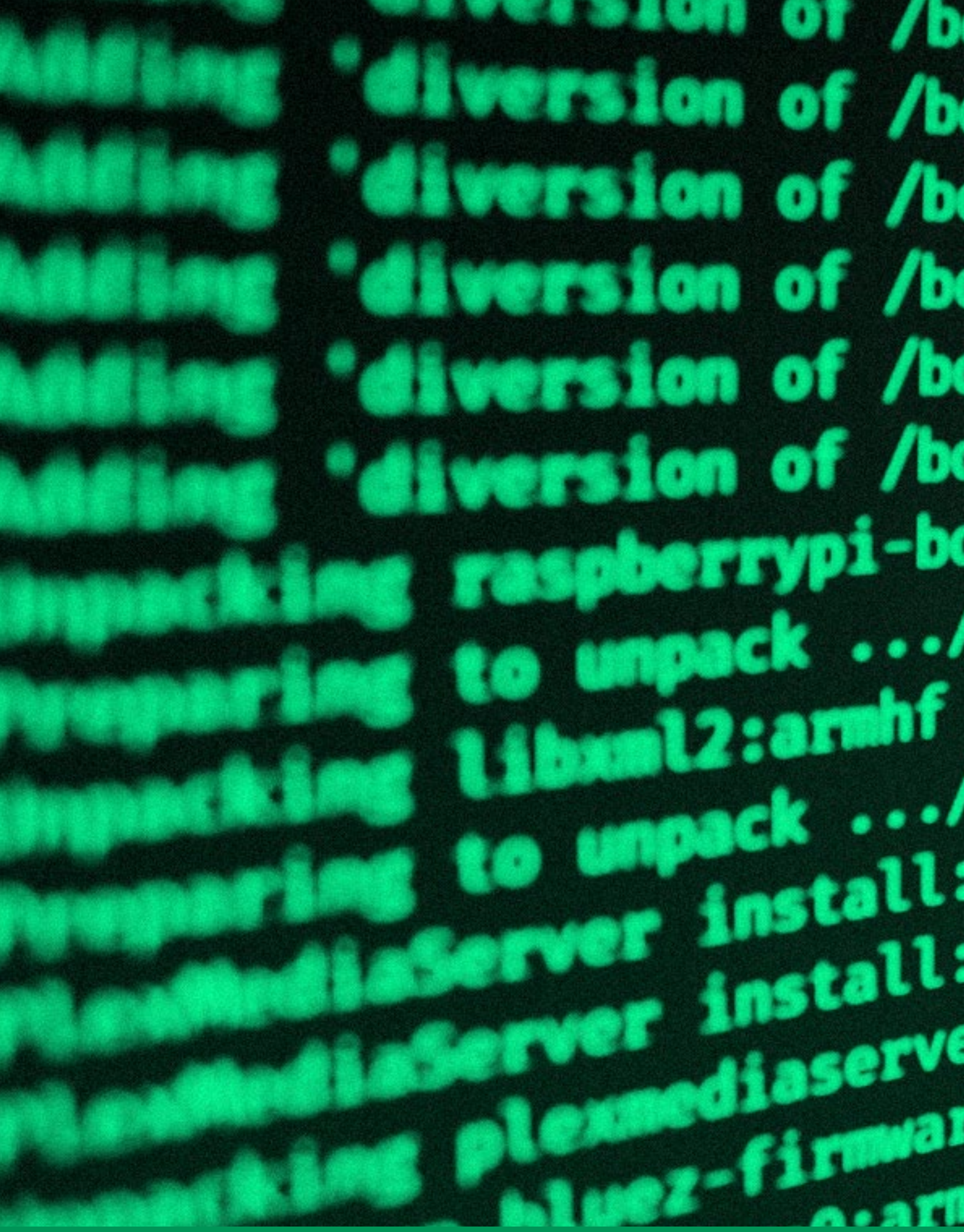
The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016 ('the Act').*

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people.

This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. They asked the Commissioner in particular, to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation in the adult world.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda so that South Australian children and young people can have greater input into the design and delivery of the policies, processes and practices connected with delivery of support services aimed directly at them.



251 Morphett Street, Adelaide SA 5000
GPO Box 1146, Adelaide SA 5001
08 8226 3355 | commissionercyp@sa.gov.au

@ccyp_sa
/ccypsa
ccyp.com.au

CPSN PR0187-2021-03-24

Commissioner for Children & Young People