



Digital Connectivity is Integral to the Human Rights of Young People

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Access and connectivity to the Internet

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback in relation to the Chief Information Officer's call for stories of how internet and phone coverage has had a positive or negative impact on the South Australian community.

As the inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People for South Australia, I promote and advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people living in South Australia and help to bring about improvements to the systems that negatively impact on them most. I have heard from many children and young people about their concerns in relation to the importance of connectivity to the Internet in almost every aspect of their lives.

Please take into account the nuanced and complex experiences and views of children and young people, which I have summarised below.

I recommend that any policy or strategy related to connectivity:

- engages with children and young people to ensure their unique and diverse needs are thoroughly known and understood;
- recognises the importance of connectivity from a children's rights perspective;
- recognises the importance of free public Wi-Fi availability on public transport and in public places and spaces including community centres and public libraries;
- recognises that not all young people have access to digital devices or reliable home internet connectivity; and
- provides all South Australian children and young people with reliable access to the Internet.

If you have any questions or need any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People
Adelaide, South Australia

Connection is Everything

Access to fast and reliable phone coverage, internet and wireless connectivity is vital to almost every part of the lives of children and young people at home, at school, in the workplace, and everywhere they go. 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.

Based on my extensive consultation with young people, I have found 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. Online is simply another place where they exist - it is part of their everyday life.

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.

According to the eSafety Commissioner¹:

- Children (aged 8-13) and teenagers (aged 14-17) spend an average of 19 hours and 33 hours respectively per week online (outside of school).
- 9 in 10 teens use the Internet to research topics of interest, watch videos, chat with friends and listen to music
- 8 in 10 teens play games online with others; and
- 6 in 10 young people aged 8 to 17 have played online multiplayer games, a form of computer gaming which is a very popular activity amongst young Australians.

Connectivity for Life

Digital access covers all aspects of young people's 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', such as 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 or ordering food to be delivered.

Friendship is enormously important to children and young people, and the Internet provides many opportunities for social life when people aren't together physically, and as a place to play and explore when they are. Many young people feel more at ease being

online than they do offline. Young people tend to use social media and texting to communicate with their friends.

Gaming in its many forms is a play activity that most children and young people enjoy doing. Multiplayer online gaming is part of the social life of young Australians – an extension of their face-to-face friendships.

The most popular device amongst young people is the mobile phone, although in my 2020 Devices, Data and Digital Life Survey, 9% of those surveyed did not have access to a mobile phone. Young people use their phones for a range of activities. Approximately 45% use them for homework. Young people also use tablets and laptops – 87% of young people surveyed had access to a laptop, which they used mostly for homework, but also for many other purposes. Of those surveyed 73% also had access to a gaming console. This was in addition to engaging in online gaming via their phones. They reported using their gaming console for activities that depend on a stable internet connection, such as streaming movies, watching YouTube videos, chatting to friends, or listening to music.

The top five important things children and young people said they use their data, devices and access for are:

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

This list reflects what children and young people reported as those things that are the most important to their overall 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.

The top five things children and young people said were important to their wellbeing in relation to digital access are:

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.

Unreliable Connectivity

Children and young people have complained to me that their digital access is unreliable and described having internet connections that ‘can disconnect regularly’. Although they may not speak about the ‘Internet’ per se, they highlight their frustration at the barriers and negative effects of not being able to fully participate online. They described difficulties completing tests or homework at home due to poor connection.

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 the connection.

‘Sometimes my brother hogs it.’ (13 year old)

A small percentage (7%) of the young people surveyed in 2020 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.

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 spoke 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 that ranged from finding work to banking, from checking emails to booking appointments.

Access to public Wi-Fi

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 tasks include organising transport, accessing online 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’.

Access to high-quality free Wi-Fi and phone charging stations are seen as essential features of public spaces for young people.

‘Data dead zones’ are a common concern, with young people regularly complaining about areas where there is no 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’ with poor mobile phone reception and Wi-Fi 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’ (15 year old)

Digital Exclusion

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

I have heard from children, families, and schools across South Australia, that basic access to technology is not a given for many. In addition to slow broadband in many areas of the State, there is poor access in remote and regional SA, with many families unable to afford internet access or digital devices.

The factors surrounding children and young people's experience of digital exclusion varies according to their age, the size and socioeconomic status of their family, and where they live.

Rates of access in SA are poor in comparison to other Statesⁱⁱ. Indigenous young people are particularly prone to digital exclusion, as are those who live in regional and remote areas.

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. This impacts the ability of the child or young person to do their homework, connect socially, access online services, or complete other 'life admin' tasks.

Many young people describe having digital access as being just as 'important' as having access to transport and electricity. The inability of some children to have access to digital technology in the same way other children do is increasingly seen as an issue of systemic discrimination.

Other young people 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.

During the Covid-19 pandemic in particular, 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 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 rely on their access to public Wi-Fi at schools, libraries, McDonalds, and in 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.

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 doⁱⁱⁱ.

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 [the] best internet; we live a bit out of town.' (16 year old)

Of the 253 young people who participated in my 2020 Devices, Data and Digital Life Survey:

- 20% said they always feel unsafe without a phone - young females were more likely than young males 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
- 8% said not having enough data for homework was always an issue
- 7% said access to Wi-Fi at home was always a problem
- 5% said not having enough data to get shifts for work was always an issue.

Those who have no, limited, or low-quality digital access, face additional barriers that can negatively impact their education and other aspects of their lives.

'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)

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

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

A lack of reliable digital access has further impact 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 who have had digital access for the whole or most 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 their digital skills, this can impact on their enjoyment and learning from an early age, as they struggle to keep up with their peers.

As children progress through school, strong connectivity is even more essential. 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 takes time away from engaging in education, leaving some young people further behind their peers.

Some students 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 exclusion 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.

The impacts of limited access to the Internet also extend beyond a student’s time at 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 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.

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 a 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 reasonable access. For example, in entry level jobs in hospitality and retail, young people are expected to use technology to manage rostering or finding people to cover or swap shifts, and to receive and respond to compulsory training requirements.

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 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, information about training and match timetables, and important contact information. All of this can significantly affect their social lives. Some young people surveyed even described how they avoid having friends over due to their embarrassment about not having a stable internet connection at home.

Engaging young people in decision making

Given the importance of digital technology to the lives of young people it is vital that any decision in relation to connectivity meaningfully engages with them to understand their diverse and unique perspectives. To address digital exclusion governments must understand 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'.

Children and young people rely on public transport, on safe ways to walk and cycle, or on parents and friends to move around physically. Their limited mobility means that they are impacted by the quality of the Internet access in the area where they live, more than most other citizens. Digital technology is a vital means to engage in the world beyond their bedroom or school. This is particularly pertinent for the thousands of young South Australians living with disability.

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, those living with chronic illness, and children and young people living in regional and remote communities.

Understanding the nuances and complexity of young people's experiences provides insight into where we need to focus efforts.

Young people have developed 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 help us to predict the needs of future generations.

Universal access

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 the Internet.

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 exclusion are clear and significant.

[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)

ⁱ eSafety Commissioner, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/>

ⁱⁱ Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2022, <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/dashboard/National.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ 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-Risksand-Opportunities-for-Children-in-a-Digital-World.pdf>