COTA Queensland

Digital inclusion for Queenslanders – Response

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Council on the Ageing (COTA) Queensland is the Seniors Peak organisation and works with and for older adults, advancing the rights, needs, interests, and futures of people as we age and have worked to influence positive outcomes for older Queenslanders for over sixty years.

We work across diverse areas to support healthy ageing and age-friendly communities. This includes areas such as ageism, aged care, health, cost of living, digital inclusion, social inclusion, disaster and risk management, employment, volunteerism, energy and essential services, housing, human rights, palliative and end of life care, and transport.

We provide a connection point for older people, their families and communities, organisations, and governments at all levels to address issues for older Queenslanders and co-create change. We provide independent information for older people, their communities, and organisations as well as education and training, advice, and other services to public and private sectors.

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Making digital inclusion more achievable and relevant for older Queenslanders

COTA Queensland views the following as ten key areas of development for making digital inclusion more achievable and relevant for older Queenslanders, particularly for more vulnerable older adults.

1. **Mentoring and peer support** remain effective methods to strengthen knowledge and confidence in digital activities, which could include intergenerational learning opportunities. Specific strategies should be developed for vulnerable older adults who are being left behind in digital and technological change. Improving digital ability of older Queenslanders could come through **existing learning enablers** such as information and skill sharing from younger generations, local libraries and community sites where free learning opportunities are provided, courses held in retirement village type settings, in addition to the digital know-how and assistance from family and friends.

2. **Raising awareness around the affordability of digital inclusion and how it impacts** older Queenslanders substantially including e.g., their ability to participate socially, stay connected to family and friends, access and retain employment opportunities, security of housing, being informed and kept up to date on community developments, and applying for concessions and subsidies.

3. **Upcycling programs** for electronic devices could be expanded to community sites and made available to older adult cohorts, and seed funding for hire or loan of devices. Establishment and expansion of **digital hubs** in the community at familiar community sites.

4. Community based **numeracy and literacy programs (at low to no cost)** could complement efforts to improve digital literacy and inclusion. We need **Digital Ambassadors** in the community who reflect target older adult cohorts and who can promote and guide people to existing digital inclusion learning opportunities.

5. **Tackle age-based discrimination** around digital media, communications, and learning opportunities (programs need to be inclusive of all age cohorts). This would **raise more awareness around ageism** and assist in addressing the primary risks to older adults that are borne from ageism (e.g., perpetuating stereotypes, difficulty in navigation of online information, strategies for mitigation and prevention of banking, financial and online scams, and creation of more opportunities for development of capacities and community participation).

6. Develop community-based programs and strategies to **de-mystify assistive technologies and understand the benefits**. Any change or program that is created needs to be based in evidence and, where possible, international standards. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) highlights key priority areas that are align with priorities for older Queenslanders - **university connectivity, affordability, digital skill development, access to services, combatting ageism, designing for digital accessibility, relevance for wellbeing and participation, protecting human rights and safe, ethical digital environments, ensuring choice and autonomy, and maintaining offline alternatives** to access goods and services.

7. For older Queenslanders, **assistive technology** sits at the interface of digital inclusion and access to services, assistance in daily living, and enabling participation and therefore needs to be taken into consideration in the review of digital inclusion opportunities for vulnerable older adult cohorts. There are factors which may influence or impact the use and uptake of

technologies (and digital resilience) in the context of community, aged care, and home care environments.

8. For older Queenslanders, **decision making and future planning around end of life and future care (health and legal processes)** is tied to digital literacy and digital ability, therefore digital inclusion ensures autonomy in very important decision-making processes. This cannot be underestimated or ignored in mainstream education programs for digital inclusion and signals opportunities for new areas of learning for all age cohorts.

9. **Resilience building** (rather than information provision) strategies are needed to enable older people to prevent and respond to cyber threats and privacy concerns in their daily digital interactions, and how this links to the prevention and mitigation of elder abuse. This needs to be a **strengths-based approach** and would include an appreciation for the communication and information challenges that older adults currently experience which impacts cultivating digital resilience.

10. **Maximise participation and reduce inherent barriers** for older Queenslanders through raising more awareness around reliability of services and major networks according to geography; the use of mobile phone as 'hotspots' and how to use mobile phone data as reliable connection to the internet; consumer rights with telecommunications products; financial vulnerability and access to telecommunications products; and available discounts or concession pricing for devices, internet, mobile phone plans, etc.

Introduction

With the ongoing transition of health, hospital, aged and community care services to digital administration and systems, in addition to everyday services moving to online platforms and reliance on apps for e.g., postal services, banking, food delivery, retail, and other services, digital inclusion for older adults is imperative for policymakers and advocates in the ageing space. Digital inclusion in 2024 equates to ongoing autonomy, decision making processes, social inclusion[1], health and care processes to keep people connected and staying in their communities for longer (ageing in place). A lack of digital inclusion or perceived lack of digital inclusion can have substantial impact particularly on older adults' health and wellbeing.

In Queensland we have diverse ageing communities with the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimating that more than 1 in 5 Queenslanders will be 65 years of age or older by 2050, and 1 in 4 Queenslanders are projected to be aged 65 years or older by 2071. Given the projected growth of cohorts aged 65 years and over in Queensland, older adults, regardless of their circumstances, need to be equipped with digital literacy and have comfortability and confidence with use of digital devices. Further, it is important that they have access to affordable technologies to assist them in the navigation and access of care and health services, in staying connected with family and friends, planning services, making appointments, paying utilities, buying groceries and essential items, studying, training and employment, and for accessing leisure and entertainment services.

Digital inclusion for older adults

COTA Queensland notes the initiatives being progressed by the Queensland Government to address digital exclusion and the positive actions already undertaken (as outlined in the Digital Inclusion for Queenslanders consultation paper); however, we also note that *the strategies do not specifically target older people*. Further, considering the latest findings from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) report, and despite older adults being identified as one of the vulnerable cohorts, it is important to highlight that older cohorts are not homogeneous – they are diverse in age, ethnicity, education, life experience and employment background and they are diverse in income, cognitive equity, geography and their communities (metropolitan, suburbia, regional, rural, and remote).

More *vulnerable older people*, which includes (but the definition is broader than) those who live with socio-economic disadvantage, require additional supports.[2] There is a smaller cohort of older Queenslanders with financial security (wealth) who are in a very different situation to address the digital divide compared to a vulnerable older person. This needs to be part of the considerations for access, affordability, digital ability, and digital resilience for older adults.

In terms of learning accessibility, an ongoing consideration for older adult cohorts is *base numeracy and literacy (not just digital literacy)* in addition to any visual/cognitive/hearing impairments that some individuals may experience or have lived with throughout their lives. Digital inclusion means building skills, creating opportunities, and reaping benefits from new and evolving skillsets, but this

[1] State Library of Queensland Digital Inclusion Programs Evaluation – As part of the findings from this program evaluation, the research team found that digital inclusion programs and related activities increased Queensland communities' digital capacity through partnerships between libraries, Indigenous Knowledge Centres, and local organisations which delivered place-based solutions to overcome barriers to digital exclusion. Overall, the programs improved the digital literacies of Queenslanders, in addition to social inclusion, enabling people to connect with others and access and use technologies how they wished.

[2] Older adult cohorts who may experience vulnerability at different stages through life transitions including (but not limited to) lower socio-economic backgrounds, those who rely on the aged pension, concession card holders; older cohorts who are renting or living in insecure accommodation; those living with disability, in addition to older adults who have limited digital literacy or access to digital technology or the internet. Older adult cohorts from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohorts will have additional considerations around learning approaches, language, and cultural components which need to be navigated appropriately.

can only be done when older adult cohorts trust who is sharing knowledge/educating, how they share the knowledge/educate, and when the learning environment is safe - free of judgement and assumptions.

COTA Queensland does not currently deliver programs to address digital exclusion. However, we acknowledge the importance of interfacing with existing programs such as the federally supported Be Connected, which could be complemented by a local mentoring program. Digital inclusion programs and local solutions should be *inclusive of all age cohorts* and learning capacities and include e.g., capacity for mentorship, intergenerational learning opportunities, and *low to no cost* professional development, training, and community education through existing easy to access community sites (and in partnership) such as libraries, Neighbourhood Centres, Senior Citizens Associations, community sites owned by local councils, University of the Third Age (U3A), Rotary or Lions sites. Individuals trained and based in local communities, utilising existing community members who are *Digital Ambassadors* who ideally reflect the target cohorts – this could be anyone from the local Librarian to the Post Office worker, from the U3A President to the Lawn Bowls President – community faces who promote and direct people to existing digital inclusion learning opportunities.

COTA Queensland views the risks of not having targeted digital inclusion programs within the wider spectrum of life changes and circumstances which impact older adults' ability to participate in community, remain employed, pay their utilities, navigate, and find information for aged care and community supports, and stay socially connected (and mentally and physically active).

The *ongoing challenge of ageism* broadly underlines the primary risks of not designing all age digital inclusion programs. With increasing expectations of higher levels of digital literacy and presumed access to relevant and updated software and devices, social inclusion and digital inclusion go hand in hand, and some older adult cohorts thrive and adapt, while other cohorts are left behind. Some of the primary risks for older adults include e.g.,

- *Perpetuating stereotypes*
  This includes perpetuating stereotypes of older adults' digital literacy and capacity to adapt to existing and new technologies. Those older adults who thrive and adapt to evolving digital technology are often not represented in mainstream media (images of older adults not associated with visually with being digitally savvy or using digital products) nor are there older adult faces on digital campaigns.
- *Difficulty in navigation of online information*
  This includes navigation of administration and services in seeking accommodation in the rental market, in seeking community and aged care services, in accessing and updating records in Medicare/Australian Tax Office/etc. 'My Gov' services online, in applying for subsidies or concessions, in planning and booking leisure or entertainment, in navigating online deliveries and retail services.
- *Heightened concerns with banking, financial and online scams*
  With the impact of recent bank branch closures (one third of banks over the last five years) there is less face-to-face service. People are becoming nervous as there is a move to a more and more cashless society. This is particularly challenging for regional, rural, and remote communities. Also, this is challenging in the context of the increase of misinformation, disinformation, cyberattacks, banking and online scams, and privacy and confidentiality considerations.[3]

[3] Choice recently highlighted the impact of online scams on older Australians - In 2022, it was much the same story. People aged 65 and over once again lost more money than other age groups to scammers – $120.7 million in total, up 47% from 2021. In 2023, COTA Queensland received increased calls regarding banking and financial concerns in relation to scams, potential scams, and also age based discrimination around application and use of banking products.

- *Missing out on development of capacities and community participation*
  This could be through lack of support for assistive technologies which should be in considered in the context of older adults' health and wellbeing, disability and/or chronic health conditions or impairments (adding an extra layer to their ability to access platforms and services or pursue employment or social participation opportunities).

Key priorities, therefore, for older adult cohorts in all communities across Queensland need to align with those of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) priority areas (and adapted to Queensland contexts) to ensure no one is left behind. These priorities include:

> ***Universal connectivity*** – Ensure that all have access to the Internet
> ***Affordability*** – Ensure equal access to digital technologies, devices and the Internet
> ***Digital skills*** – Enhance digital literacy to reduce the digital skills gap
> ***Access to services*** – Ensure access to everyday services that move online
> ***Combat ageism*** – Tackle stereotypes and prejudice against older technology users
> ***Design for all*** – Foster digital accessibility
> ***Relevance*** – Leverage digital technologies for the well-being and participation of older persons
> ***Human rights*** – Protect human rights and ensure secure, safe and ethical digital environments
> ***Choice*** – Ensure autonomy and ability to choose whether to use digital technologies
> ***Backup*** – Maintain continued offline access to goods and services.

COTA Queensland has also identified mechanisms for providing information in a specific context - *assistive technology* - which is underpinned by digital inclusion. For example, having hardcopy information e.g., brochure or leaflet, in addition to digital resources (available through e.g., QR Code, URL), and might also take the form of a hardcopy (and online) directory for local communities regarding services and supports available in the region, who can assist people in better understanding when they may need to engage with a local supplier or service provider to learn more about assistive technology and how they can use it in the home or to assist them in maintaining their lifestyle. This information could be made available at sites in the community where older adults and their support networks may frequent such as RSL clubs, community and neighbourhood centres, CWA halls, hairdressers, post offices, the local pool, libraries, or GP clinics. The information/resources could be developed in consultation with older adults and their support networks. Further, partnering with local suppliers or service providers (who have staff trained in assessment for use of assistive technology and implementation and use of technologies) who may be able to provide at request to community clubs and groups introductory information sessions on assistive technology.

Through our existing engagement with communities and older adults, we have observed anecdotally the impact of limited digital inclusion on older adults' ability to participate but also the positive impact that digital inclusion has when older adult needs are taken into consideration. From community consultations and observations from Seniors Peak related programs and the Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP) in 2022 and 2023, we highlight in the current response the challenges and barriers, the positives and enablers to access, affordability, digital ability, and digital resilience for older adults.

Access

To improve access to devices in Queensland, raise awareness around ability to access devices in public libraries, for example, and *seed funding for hire or borrowing of devices* for a small maintenance fee through local community sites such as Country Women's Association (CWA), Senior

Citizens Associations, Neighbourhood Centres, Tool Libriares, Men's Sheds, etc. This would also enable older adults to 'try before they buy' type approach so they can experiment with technology and receive guidance around which devices best suits their needs in a safe inclusive and friendly environment before entering the retail space.

Upcycling programs for electronic devices could be expanded to community sites/made available so this reduces e-waste, and this may include corporate/office e-waste from state and federal government, local councils, larger organisations who are upgrading their devices or are required to upgrade devices for quality assurance purposes.

To improve access to the internet in Queensland, it is recommended the *establishment and expansion of existing digital hubs in the community at the community sites* mentioned above and similar spaces where basic infrastructure is available to support such services. In rural and remote communities where there is unreliable or limited reception and connectivity, possibly the establishment of Wi-Fi/internet hotspots where local community members can sit and safely navigate the internet to meet their weekly shopping/banking/communication needs. Also, raising awareness of reliable telecommunications networks in rural and remote areas and which retail providers can provide access and guidance to accessing these networks.

For Older Queenslanders to have access to the right number and types of devices, this means they can access the type of technology which is set-up and tailored to their needs. Examples we have heard in the community include tablet devices with a banking app for weekly banking needs, games apps for leisure and hobbies (and to stay mentally healthy), a transport app to assist with navigation of public transport, and access to the internet for queries and research topics (examples often mentioned by older adults include searching local service providers, recipes, local activities and events in their community, TransLink services and transport routes/planning transport, travel planning, banking and legal queries). Further examples include the smartphone being used for texts, calls, camera, and travel navigation (like GPS type functionality). Older adults are clear they adapt to technology at their own pace and utilise it in very specific ways. They don't wish to be forced to use devices, apps, or software that they feel they have no need to use. In December 2023, older adults told us specific ways that they seek information e.g.,

> *Tech. Being able to use technology is central to most of the other issues. Knowledge of what is available and when; access to banking; knowledge of where things are in the community; communication with family; planning to access the community; knowledge about supports in the community and access.*
>
> *Legal matters* [need to be] *simplified into common language.*
>
> *<u>Legalism</u> - Centrelink (hard to approach, problems at time of going into care), Public Trustee (very very very bad), Enduring Powers of Attorney, Advanced Health Directives, Wills (can't write a Will that will withstand challenges), especially for remarriage with children.*

We also know that *decision making and future planning around end of life and future care (health and legal processes)* is tied to digital literacy and digital ability of older adults. Digital inclusion means they can remain autonomous in their planning and decision making where possible with Enduring Power of Attorney, Statutory Health Attorneys, Voluntary Assisted Dying, and Advanced Health Directives, for example.

Through the lens of assistive technology, digital inclusion is key in fall prevention, mobility aides and technology which enable people to age in place/stay in their home e.g., walkers, emergency pendant

with alarms for fall risks, and overall, these devices assist older adults with changing capacities or with disabilities to get out and about in the community and participate.

Within the administration and logistics of the care context, there are *factors which may influence or impact the use and uptake of technologies* in general which, in turn, may have implications for use and uptake of assistive technologies for clients. Through the Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP), service providers have indicated that there were several aspects that supported change and future uptake of technologies within service context with older adults including e.g., budget considerations to adequately support programs (staff training and purchase of devices for client use); collaboration or partnerships with neighbourhood centres, libraries, etc. to embed change and knowledge in a sustainable way; enable easy access to tool and templates, provision of reference points for best practice, who is already having success with use or uptake of technologies or specific programs or initiatives; and measuring outcomes around e.g., skills, knowledge and confidence in use and uptake of technologies. They also had client stories where they had positive outcomes and experiences from becoming more digitally savvy.

Affordability

Lack of affordability in the digital inclusion space impacts older Queenslanders substantially – they miss out on social participation, employment opportunities, security of housing, being informed and kept up to date with community developments including notifications on adverse weather events, traffic, construction, and infrastructure developments, making changes to appointments, keeping track of health appointments and updates, navigating community and aged care services online, tracking progress on applications, application for subsidies and concessions, staying in contact with family members and friends who don't live locally, and access to free or low cost learning, entertainment and activities online (to name a few).

More can be done to improve affordability of connecting to and using the internet for older adults in Queensland through Affordability Programs (specifically internet connection, affordable/low cost access to devices, and mobile phone data) can be designed to *maximise participation and reduce barriers* for older adults by:

- raising more awareness around reliability of services and major networks (and retail providers which provide services on the different primary networks e.g., retail provider that provides telecommunications services through Telstra might provide more reliable network coverage in regional and remote areas than through Optus, etc.) in certain service areas
- raising awareness around using mobile phones as internet 'hotspots' when there is an emergency and/or when there is a power outage/loss of power
- use of mobile phone data as reliable source of internet if not affordable to retain internet connection and mobile phone plan
- raising awareness around consumer rights with telecommunications product (e.g., not feeling obliged or forced into purchasing a 'bundle' of services where they will not have a need to utilise one or more of the products)
- older adult consumers might undergo a brief assessment/survey for financial vulnerability when seeking telecommunications products and then resultant services or products can be tailored to their financial background and needs; and
- discounts offered on basic services such as mobile phone data and internet connection and monthly plans with no lock in contracts in case financial circumstances change due to loss of employment or health, or care commitments.

Within the service provision/care context, older adults are at risk of becoming housebound or isolated, missing appointments and activities, when they are met with e.g., lengthy administration

and prohibitive costs through wait time and cost for replacement parts or repair time for mobility aides, devices or equipment which impacts delivery of supports.

Digital ability

More can be done to *improve digital ability* of older Queenslanders through promotion of the digital enablers which are already happening in local communities such as:

- information and skill sharing from younger generations regarding the use of digital technology and social media
- local libraries and free community education regarding digital/IT lessons
- courses held in retirement villages regarding use of smartphones, technology, digital devices are useful and builds confidence in using technology
- assistance from family and friends to use computer, digital devices, and gaming with people online; and
- local computer, IT and digital literacy courses at local venues or community spaces.

In terms of measurement of time and resources in triaging with digital assistance and mitigation of risk to staff in provision of this support, this is usually outsourced to the organisation or department that oversees the system. However, COTA Queensland will assist and re-direct older adults and their support networks via phone or email to find alternative information supports e.g., posting hardcopy information, assist someone on the phone by directing them verbally to correct site/place online, printing out or emailing list of information supports in long-form URL or short-form URL depending on the preference, providing informal advice and referrals regarding non-smartphone devices, alarms, assistive technologies, and fall prevention devices.

We understand that community organisations funded for the mitigation of social isolation and who run activity/social programs for older adults, operate on barebones staffing and rely on volunteers. Volunteer workforces have diverse abilities and are at differing levels of digital literacies and digital abilities which impacts the organisation's overall ability to collect and monitor data coming into the organisation e.g., attendance at programs, resources, queries, etc. which is all important data to feed back to state government to sustain their funding and lifespan of the program. This can have very positive impacts for older adults and the wider community, but the benefits to health and wellbeing are sometimes lost due to time limitations, reporting system restrictions and compounded by limited staff with the digital literacy/time/capacity to stay across the required evidence.

Older adults at one of our regional forums in December 2023, indicated assumptions were made that everyone understands technology and online security, scams, and AI development but this was not always the case, and the pace of technological development was sometimes scary. Older adults also indicated that navigation of online information was still proving tricky and sometimes for this reason there was a preference for face-to-face communication and hardcopy information.

> *Face to face information - assistance access for individual services? Shopping, cleaning, cooking for people in own homes.*
>
> *Difficult to access facilities online! Need face to face to answer questions relating to my health and wellbeing.*

Through our Listening Post project in late 2022, we learnt that older adults have unique journeys with digital inclusion – those that wish to engage digitally and with technology, those that do not, and those that use technology in quite specific ways. Overall, people wished to be heard, have their needs understood, and access information readily through hardcopy formats and face to face conversations. 'Going online' was considered a secondary (or tertiary) form of communication which

was adapted for specific purposes. People prefer to learn and adapt technology at their own pace (not be forced, told, or rushed to use the internet or digital devices). It was indicated that more time was required for IT and digital technology classes (people sometimes felt rushed in these classes) or the classes did not have similar software, hardware or devices that were used in the home environment (and therefore trickier to transpose learnings at home).

Older Queenslanders also told us that they used a mix of hardcopy and digital resources for life administration and the main devices were iPads, tablets, and smartphones. People spoke of the handiness in using banking apps, the guidance they received from adult children or grandchildren regarding how to use devices or recommendations for apps or improving skills with digital technologies. They further spoke of trusted sites they visited to read up on advice and information and strategies around online scams, and community-based programs for learning about and how to use digital technology. They also spoke about 'IT savvy' spouses or partners that they were reliant upon (or they were relied upon as the IT savvy person) to fix technology/devices/software issues/understanding online platforms or services.

Finally, in the care context, it has been suggested by service providers that education or training for direct care staff in the home to guide older adults in the use of digital devices would be extremely useful.

Digital resilience

Building digital resilience in older adults needs to start with a strengths based approach around being informed, being aware of potential issues around government and business practices and how individual data is used, awareness raising around options and choice (how to opt out of or adjust subscriptions and mailing lists, 'cookie' preferences, data mining, data retention, etc.) any privacy concerns with online information or accounts, identification of misinformation or disinformation, harassment online, scams (banking, financial, legal, other), cybersecurity and general online safety (all areas highlighted by the Digital Inclusion consultation paper).

Notably, for older Queenslanders the top three forms of elder abuse are psychological, financial, and social abuse.[4] General online safety is compromised when very persuasive tactics and language are used around scams (banking, financial, legal, other), or when family members engage in financial abuse with older family members through withholding or control of financial information or banking processes. There are therefore emotional and psychological components to overcome in cultivating digital resilience in more vulnerable and technology adverse older adult cohorts.

Utilising existing educational programs provided through initiatives such as Be Connected and Tech Savvy Seniors and the services provided at local libraries, for example, would be good platforms to start in community education programs which not only introduce required skillset to navigate online information but also use digital devices and raise awareness around misinformation, harassment, scams, cybersecurity, and general online safety. Language and font, visual cues, and other cues would also be included in such as a program, along with strategies and tactics to avoid 'taking the bait'; this would encompass all forms of digital communications e.g., anything received on tablet and smartphone devices such as emails or texts, social media messages, safety when posting to social media platforms, and being aware of the fine print when signing up for a 'free' service such as social media accounts, email accounts, retail accounts (shopping online), signing up for newsletters, etc. Examples of other organisations to partner with may include Queensland Police Service, local councils and library branches, community and neighbourhood centres, and large community organisations.

[4] Top three forms of elder abuse reported by Uniting Care's Elder Abuse Prevention Unit in their Elder Abuse report: psychological (76.6%), financial (62.1%), and social abuse (27.8%).

Building awareness around how cultivating digital resilience links to knowledge is power and better strategies for *prevention and mitigation of elder abuse* or to ageism when there is exposure or potential exposure would also be appropriate; however, this would be presented from the perspective of a campaign which raises awareness AND equips older adults through pointing them to resources and existing bodies/peaks/sites/organisations where they tackle ageism, elder abuse, and general safety online through community education, being pro-active, and they offer online and offline training and education options so this is accessible to all older adult cohorts and their support networks (including staff in aged and community care, health professionals, family members, etc.) with considerations for accessibility needs around e.g., visual, hearing and cognitive impairments.

Also, the role of assistive technology needs to be taken into consideration for older adult cohorts and how this can increase and enhance digital resilience. Motivation and trust are hugely important for older adult cohorts, and this was evidenced to us in 2022 and 2023 in our community consultations. Through the Listening Post we heard that older adults had great frustration with navigation of systems such as My Aged Care, health care and government online systems such as myGov. Some older adults and their support networks just gave up using digital platforms through frustration and/or concern over their privacy and confidentiality online. Digital inclusion and digital literacy insights included varying degrees of use and acceptance of technology e.g., older adults did not wish to keep updating skills, software or hardware or they used technology in very specific ways.

Overall, four cohorts of older adults were identified in relation to digital literacy and digital ability:

1. those that embrace technology and use it daily and own their digital devices
2. with family assistance those that do specific tasks with devices and navigate online for specific purposes
3. those that have the technology but only perform basic functions e.g., smartphone used for calls and texts and occasionally photos; or
4. those that do not wish to engage at all with digital devices or go online and/or they do not own a computer or digital device.

In terms of *challenges to digital engagement*, older adults indicated their disappointment in increasing lack of hardcopy information for news, newsletters, community events, and community developments – they missed community noticeboards, local newspapers, etc. and noted that a lot of information had now been transposed to online platforms or provided as standalone online content.

Some older adults had become frustrated with QR Codes and the technological changes broughr on by COVID e.g., use of QR Code to check in to hospitality spaces, ordering food via a smartphone, or accessing menus online. Many older adults commented that they rely on their adult children or grandchildren to assist them with their digital devices.

> *Don't want to touch any buttons on the phone because I don't know what will happen.*

It also became apparent *barriers to digital resilience* were created from impactful life experiences e.g., when seeking health or medical supports and the administrative processes which had moved from hardcopy to online records; the impact of COVID on scheduling and waitlist for specialist appointments and surgeries, and the delays in receiving medical care for chronic, disabling, life threatening or painful conditions.

> *I fell through the systems - there was a stuff up.* (An older male who was on a longer than usual wait list and his files had not been looked at for quite some time. Files got lost in the system and the hospital had changed over to digital filing system three years before).

The COTA Queensland team also noted during the Listening Post project the negative comments regarding digital literacy and technology and people's perceptions of digital data was often a barrier to requesting permission to take photos, videos, or voice recordings, despite reassurance of ethics process in place.

There were also positives raised regarding acceptance and use of digital devices and technology.

> *I plod along (on the computer).*
>
> [They] *give it a go*. (Story of 92-year-old woman who uses Facetime on her Apple smartphone and the participant was inspired by the example)

There was sometimes an awe for digital technology in general (the advancements made) and awe at younger generations navigating and processing huge quantities of information at once (and this was tied to perception of intellect and confidence with navigating the online world). However, this was often presented simultaneously with some concern about the impact, particularly on younger generations e.g., decreasing or limiting face-to-face communications, showing lack of respect, and other behaviours.

> *People need to live in the here and now.*

Multiple generations (e.g., up to three generations) were using digital technology and assisting each other.

> *Love social media, but interesting posts come up a few days too late* [Late to read the update about news, event, initiative, etc.]. *[...] We want to know how it works - younger people just accept that it works.* [I'm] *scared to touch the computer in case it breaks.*

Older adults highlight positive impact of technology in their lives and communities and how the uptake of technology improved their social cohesion and participation and people's ability to connect or unite in the most rural of places e.g., larger clubs, networks, or interest groups with members up to 100kms apart who could all 'Zoom in' together; this was also viewed as a positive legacy from the acute COVID period. Some apps were being adopted to assist with practical updates e.g., Snap Send Solve to report local infrastructure or safety issues which served as motivation to engage with digital technology in very specific ways.

Older adults in the Brisbane North regional forum in December 2023 indicated the following as the *biggest challenges for communications and information*:

- navigation of the know-how for use of computers, tablets, and iPads
- navigation of health information, legal advice, and general information online (they had a sense of feeling overwhelmed or not knowing where to start, or where to find offline information)
- navigation of aged and community care services and information (e.g., My Aged Care; knowing where to find service providers in the region, MyGov system, etc.)[5]
- general navigation and accessing internet, websites and online information
- actions such as connecting, networking, and informing were considered trickier to do online

[5] Older adults explained that depending on who you contact you get different information, misinformation, or the wrong information. One example (raised as real-life example and as a hypothetical) was of a husband and wife who are retired and unaware of the services available – if one partner suddenly becomes incapacitated and urgently needs to find out about services and supports.

- finding out information around essential services and during times of emergency
- finding out what is happening in the community (which traditionally was through hardcopy community newsletters and noticeboards, for example).

Further areas that were indicated as challenging by a few individuals included navigating use of smartphone, mobile or telephone; finding factsheets, leaflets, or brochures; use of libraries; hobbies and interests (lack of information; knowing where to find information regarding interests and activity groups; community events); deliveries and community services; community participation and events; sharing and collaborating information; and books and newspapers (dwindling as hardcopy items). The gradual move to a more cashless society was also raised and the growing concern about what is going to happen in the near future (e.g., unable to continue to conduct everyday tasks like paying bills, banking services, etc.).[6]

In addition, there was reluctance to navigate IT due to scams, comments that technological issues were not always easy to resolve, there was enormous effort in seeking out assistance, needing to know the basic, particularly around security issues and scams, concerns in relation to Artificial Intelligence (AI) taking over systems and customer service roles, and keeping up to date with technology and the pace of development was proving challenging.

> *With the "new" technological age, people are losing connection to others. Even today's youth is less connected. Mental health would benefit from ways to encourage all ages to connect. Government should prioritise their otherwise they will need to prioritise depression down the track.*
>
> *Aged struggle with technology becomes isolated and misinformation due to inability to use technology.*
>
> *Things are changing faster than ever and struggling to keep up.*

There was also a sense from the cohort that technology was having not so positive impacts on other generations.

> *Children and grandchildren - how to connect when they don't respond to texts and calls.*

Positives mentioned during the regional forum around communication and information include quality education and ongoing assistance with learning technology and good emergency and essential services where systems worked well. Several strong enablers for good community information and communication were indicated as the local libraries, being able to navigate online information to specific places on the internet and visiting specific recommended websites, and being able to build digital literacy with computers, laptops, tablets, iPads and smartphones. Other areas which worked well for individual older adults around communication and information were being able to engage in hobbies and interests, research health information, community participation and events, find books online, and read newspapers, and in general remain connected, informed and network.

Recommendation for community-based initiatives

COTA Queensland recommends continuing to utilise and promote existing federally funded programs such as Be Connected and state funded programs such as Tech Savvy in addition to

[6] This has also been raised anecdotally in queries to the COTA Queensland office and we note that this has received increasing attention in the Media e.g., https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-12-30/will-consumers-have-to-pay-to-access-cash-or-will-we-be-cashless/103249748

establishment of a local digital mentoring program or digital hub which can be run from community sites that older adults are already familiar with. This would be in partnership with larger community organisations, indigenous knowledge hubs and/or local councils which are known and trusted by community members and who already have a strong presence in the community.

- Community sites local library branches, community sites, or neighbourhood centres would be accessible for mobility aides and wheelchair users.
- On site facilities would taken into consideration and tailor program content for visual and hearing impairment; or one step further, content would be designed from the start and adapted so all age cohorts (but particularly more vulnerable older cohorts) could access and understand the content.
- Content would use language that is plain English in a pedagogical style (which would also lend itself to easier translation into other language for culturally and linguistically diverse cohorts).
- Content is adapted to local context and utilises local technologies (with consideration of available networks in the region – what realistically can be achieved with resourcing available).
- Content and approach would be informed by evidence based frameworks from earlier research or evaluations that have been undertaken on the benefits of digital literacy programs such as the Digital Inclusion Programs Evaluation undertaken by QUT in 2022.
- As part of training/community education content, examples of digital resources available online and through different platforms would be showcased according to topic e.g., practising searching for local Centrelink office, Housing Service Centre; how to create an account for an online Woolworths order; how to search local branch of CWA/Heart Foundation Walking Group/Men's Shed, etc.
- Intergenerational component to the program – young adults could be encouraged to participate as volunteer mentors in addition to adult and older adult mentors (all age cohorts).

This recommendation is an example of an initiative and an initial foundation from which to build skills for other initiatives in the community that would ensure that digital inclusion becomes and remains more achievable for all older Queenslanders regardless of their circumstances or geography.