**The Smith Family**

Learn today, change tomorrow.

**Submission on the**
**Data and Digital Government Strategy**

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**Contact**
Wendy Field
Head of Policy, Programs and Strategy
The Smith Family
Ph 02 9085 7192 | mobile 0408 792 132
Email: Wendy.Field@thesmithfamily.com.au
GPO Box 10500
SYDNEY NSW 2001

# Data and Digital Government Strategy

## INTRODUCTION

We welcome the opportunity to provide input The Australian Government's draft Data and Digital Government Strategy. We support the Government's vision for simple, secure and connected public services for all people and businesses through world class data and digital capabilities.

Given The Smith Family's focus on working with children, young people and their families who experience financial disadvantage and a range of complex challenges, and may struggle to access the digital tools and resources they need to fully engage in an increasingly digital world, our key focus is on two key aspects of the discussion paper:

- **Digital inclusion** and accessibility; and
- Increased data and **digital literacy**

### Digital Inclusion

The Smith Family recognizes that digital services will continue to change rapidly and that there is an urgent need to address inequalities in digital access, skills, and capabilities across the Australian population. This will require better co-ordination from all levels of government, private industry, education, not-for profits, and the broader community.

Recent research highlights the complexity of addressing digital inclusion for families living in disadvantage: some families are investing in technology at significant household cost; devices are often not suitable for their needs; and families often experience data poverty as they have inadequate data for their needs and prefer pre-paid mobile plans[1].

The recent release of the 2023 Digital Inclusion Index highlighted that 9.4% of the Australian population is highly digitally excluded, and 5.1% of those surveyed either often or always had to cut back on essentials to afford the internet[2].

Those who are digitally excluded are impacted socially and economically. Families with low incomes, low educational attainment, experiencing a disability, or experiencing unemployment are more likely to be digitally excluded[3]. Worryingly the gap between people in the lowest and highest 20% of household income has increased over the past three years[4].

Access to a device that is reliably connected to the internet at home is a pre-requisite for participation in an increasing number of government services. In the absence of a comprehensive approach to ensuring that all Australians are digitally included, we risk exacerbating challenges faced by these families and individuals and further excluding them from receiving necessary support and service as well as limiting their contribution to the Australian community.

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

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

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

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

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## Digital literacy/skills development

The Smith Family believes that digital inclusion is key to engaging in education. As part of our long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life*, students in school and tertiary education requiring assistance, are offered digital support (including device, internet, and skills) based on their individual family needs.

The OECD Learning Framework 2030 cites both digital literacy and data literacy as core fundamental competencies for future education[5]. Ensuring that students are building these skills is essential to future service delivery and ensuring access for everyone, in line with the aims of the Data and Digital Strategy,.

The Digital Inclusion Index highlights the ongoing need for access and affordability measures for low-income families needing digital support, and the necessity of increasing digital ability. The report particularly highlighted digital ability and that skills must keep up with changing technologies and applications[6].

It is important to recognize the ongoing process of obtaining digital skills; that it requires continual learning and cannot be resolved by a one-off training course or assistance. Building a basis of confidence around digital ability and encouraging constant learning is key. Parents of school aged children recently reflected this to us in consultations, providing examples of maintaining skills to ensure they could access the apps utilised by schools. Research further supports confidence as key in building digital skills[7].

The Smith Family supports the approach of an omni-channel service delivery and ensuring that online services are accessible and easy to use. Our own approach to assisting families to access information aligns with this and we frequently test changes with families to ensure it is user-friendly and use phone support to build skills by explaining and demonstrating how to access services through our portal. Providing digital support often requires tailoring to the individual at a point in time, recognizing their circumstances and challenges.

The Smith Family supports the work of the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA) in developing a Digital Capability Framework. This will allow a coordinated approach to how organisations tailor support programs to build digital capability. As services increasingly go online, the Framework will provide common language to ensure online services are mapped with minimum capabilities in mind.

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[5] OECD, 2018. *The Future of Education and Skills 2030:*
https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper%20(05.04.2018).pdf
[6] Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Holcombe-James, I., Ormond-Parker, L., & Ganley, L. (2023). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023*. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra.
[7] Dezuanni, M., Osman, K., Foth, M., Kennedy, J., Marshall, A., McCosker, A., Mitchell, P., Notley, T., Mamalipurath, J., Mavoa, J. and Tucker, J. (2022). Advancing digital inclusion in low income Australian families: Interim findings report. QUT, Brisbane, Australia.

## ABOUT THE SMITH FAMILY

The Smith Family is a national charity working in over 90 low SES communities across every state and territory. We have been supporting children and families experiencing disadvantage for over 100 years. Our vision is a world where every child has the opportunity to change their future. Our belief is that education is one of the most powerful change agents and our purpose is to overcome educational inequality caused by poverty.

Our work focuses on Australian children in families and communities where we know it's harder for them to fully participate in their education without some help. Our approach is an early intervention one, providing support to children and families who are likely to struggle without additional support. This includes children and families living in financial disadvantage, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and those living in communities experiencing disadvantage.

Our work is informed by the ecological model of child development and the multiple influences on children's development, including their family, peers, educational institutions and the community in which they live. Our work draws on research and our practice experience to acknowledge that children's developmental trajectories are not set in stone and immutably influenced by their individual and family circumstances. Our experience is that with the right support at the right time all children and families can thrive. We have a particular focus on strengthening the home learning environment and work in partnership with families, educational institutions, community organisations and professionals, corporates, philanthropy and the wider service system across Australia.

Our five-year strategy commits us to ensuring that all students on our flagship *Learning for Life Program* are digitally included. Our work recognises that for a child experiencing disadvantage, not having access to essential digital tools like a device, reliable internet access and digital skills means that they are unable to fully engage with their education and risk falling behind their peers at school.