



Beyond Blue submission to the NSW Digital Inclusion Strategy

19 July 2024

Introduction

Beyond Blue welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the NSW Digital Inclusion Strategy (the Strategy).

As the national depression and anxiety initiative, Beyond Blue is a well-known and trusted source of evidence-based, free information, support and advice for everyone in NSW and around Australia. We work with the community to improve mental health and make it easier for people to feel better earlier, get well and stay well. We support the NSW community through digital content, tools and services, our 24/7 telephone and webchat support service, online peer-to-peer community forums, and community engagement activities.

We hope to support the development of the Strategy by sharing our insights and real-world digital experience in this submission. We respond to the themes in the discussion paper from a mental health and wellbeing lens. We recommend actions that can ensure the Strategy is most effective at achieving its objectives and promoting mental health and wellbeing to all people in NSW.

List of recommendations

1. The Strategy should include clearly defined **digital inclusion principles and core implementation enablers**. This should include recognising the need for resourcing to build the capacity of the not-for-profit sector in their delivery of safe, secure and effective digital services.
2. The Strategy should be **responsive to the needs and challenges faced by people who are at risk of or experiencing mental health conditions**.
3. The Strategy should **make cybersecurity, digital trust and safety a priority** to promote mental health and wellbeing. Being able to trust that online mental health information is safe and credible, and that digital services are effective, secure and respect your privacy, is critical. There should be protections in place to minimise the harms experienced in digital environments, which can have significant mental health implications.
4. The NSW Government should take a **person-centred approach** to the Strategy's development, remaining responsive to the intersecting experiences of the five pillars proposed in the discussion paper and other experiences of marginalisation and disadvantage to promote mental health equity.
5. **Digital inclusion initiatives should be co-designed with community**, consulting broadly with a range of impacted audiences, and ensuring any efforts do not inadvertently isolate people from necessary supports, community and information. The NSW Government could engage with people with lived and living experience of mental ill-health through established groups like Beyond Blue's Blue Voices community.
6. **The Strategy must prioritise closing the gap for First Nations communities**, including as outlined in the First Nations Digital Inclusion Plan and using the data and with reference to the data collected on the scale and nature of the digital gap by remoteness through the Mapping the Digital Gap project.

Recommendation 1: Principles and enabling resources

- Beyond Blue recommends the Strategy prioritises:
 - **Digital inclusion principles** – These should be clear and consistent with national and international frameworks, as well as remaining future-ready. The Strategy should reflect the Australian Human Rights Commission’s position that digital access is a basic human rightⁱ, underpinned by the protections afforded by the right to privacy, freedom from discrimination, freedom of expression and freedom of thought. It should also embed principles of community centricity and Safety by Designⁱⁱ, which include service provider responsibility; user empowerment and autonomy; and transparency and accountability.
 - **Consumer choice** – Giving people choice about how and when they engage with digital services is key to comprehensive inclusion. If crucial health services are only available digitally, this is not truly accessible for people who cannot or do not want to utilise digital tools.
- These principles will need to be supported by key implementation enablers to ensure that the Strategy is implemented and achieves its vision, including:
 - **Implementation plan** – the Strategy should be accompanied by a clear implementation plan informed by implementation science, a whole-of-Government commitment to digital inclusion, and a commitment to transparent monitoring and reporting.
 - **Sustainable funding** - ensuring long-term and sustainable funding arrangements are in place to support the activities of the Strategy are more likely to lead to greater efficacy, enhanced community confidence in the availability of digital services and better workforce security. Longer-term funding also recognises the time that is needed for genuine community engagement.
 - **Workforce capability** - Research on digital technology in the not-for-profit sector reveals that while not-for-profit staff and volunteers have had to rapidly upskill in the wake of COVID-19 to provide their essential services and skills support to their communityⁱⁱⁱ, 46 per cent of surveyed participants are not confident using technology in the workplace. 45 per cent of surveyed not-for-profit organisations cited staff capability as one of their biggest challenges^{ibid}. Workforce capability and confidence in responsible management of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a particularly pressing issue, given that the not-for-profit sector adoption of AI doubled between 2022 and 2023^{ibid}. AI has potential to advance inclusive, patient-centred, evidence-driven digital mental healthcare^{iv}, if it is safely integrated by an appropriately supported workforce. Strengthening workforce digital capabilities is fundamental for building an integrated and secure mental health system that protects personal information, supports appropriate information sharing, manages cybersecurity threats, accurately captures quality data, and improves peoples experience of navigating the mental health system, all of which ultimately contribute to improving health equity and wellbeing outcomes.

Recommendation 2: Digital inclusion and mental health support

- Digital inclusion and mental health and wellbeing are closely interconnected. People experiencing mental ill-health face unique risks in terms of digital exclusion. They tend to be **more digitally excluded** and their digital exclusion can compound mental health challenges by preventing access to resources, services and supports and impacting determinants of health such as employment and social connection^v.
- Mental health information, services and supports are increasingly being delivered in digital environments (for example, young people often turn to social media for mental health information). Despite the promise of digital mental health in mental health promotion and support, the ABS estimates that less than 5 per cent of people use digital technologies, including phone and internet, for mental health^{vi}. These trends indicate a need for greater investment in digital mental health, focussed effort in embedding digital mental health interventions within the mental health system, and building community confidence in digital mental health interventions, and the necessity to continue to prioritise availability and choice in the delivery of mental health services by offering non-digital supports.

- Digital mental health services can help improve access to mental health care or complement traditional face-to-face care given their scalability. These services are typically low-cost for end users and have the potential to reach people who do not or cannot access traditional services (e.g., people in rural/remote and low-income regions) in a convenient setting (home, workplace, schools, through clinicians' and other mental health professionals' workplaces). Digital mental health services are portable and have the added advantage of reducing the stigma associated with using mental health services by offering users complete or greater anonymity and the ability to manage their mental health problems in real-time.
- Digital inclusion declines with remoteness, creating a persistent gap between capital cities and the rest of the State or Territory^{vii}. This disparity reflects the vastly different geographies across Australia, as well as different levels of investment into telecommunications infrastructure and opportunities for digital support and learning. People living in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia are chronically under-served by both non-digital and digital mental health care^{viii}, exacerbated by structural barriers such as travel and cost, higher rates of stigma and privacy concerns, where health professionals are embedded in local communities and more likely to be known to help-seekers^{ix}. Digital mental health services can contribute to closing this divide by offering alternative accessible options^{ibid}. Lower levels of mental health literacy compared to major cities increase the impact of depression in rural and remote communities^x, and mental health promotion, early intervention and prevention trainings that are being offered digitally^{xi} help bridge this gap.
- The importance of inclusive digital mental health services is exemplified through Beyond Blue's signature mental health coaching program, NewAccess. NewAccess has a multi-modal delivery model, meaning it can be delivered face to face, through video conferencing or over the phone. NewAccess' digital accessibility has been identified as a key success factor of the program, alongside it being free and requiring no GP referral. Participants reference the inbuilt flexibility and affordability as key to their positive experience and demonstrate the impact of embedding digital inclusion into mental health interventions. Evaluations^{xii} demonstrate that mental health treatments delivered digitally are producing significant clinical improvements for people, and that the magnitude of improvement produced, especially by therapist supported treatment, is comparable with more resource intensive face-to-face treatment options. Digital mental health services play a crucial part in the Australian mental health ecosystem, making digital inclusion a priority. However, more research is required to determine what works for whom, when and why.

"This seemed like an incredibly easy option and starting point to get help. The idea of having to 'find' a practitioner and then book an appointment with long wait dates, or having to go to a GP when I was struggling was incredibly overwhelming. This was easy, it was online, I could do at home and there wasn't any wait times. It made it very easy to act and also not worry that I wasn't 'struggling' enough to qualify."

"I had been feeling low mood for months, and decided it was time to seek some help. My online small business was just starting, and with a small family, finances and time were already a stress, so I searched online for a free and remote way to access some support. I came across beyond blue's program, and noticed that they offered a free 6 session coaching service that could be done remotely. I reached out, had a quick phone call to discuss my needs, and was booked in for my first session".

Participant quotes highlighting the accessibility advantages of the digitally inclusive mental health program, NewAccess

- **We suggest investing in specific efforts aimed at addressing the barriers faced by people living with mental ill-health**, such as:
 - Investing in the design, delivery, evaluation and scaling of digital mental health interventions that keep pace with emerging technologies and community expectations of best practice digital experiences.
 - Building the capacity of primary care practitioners while also ensuring they are equipped to (a) refer people to digital mental health supports; and (b) identify and support those facing digital exclusion.
 - Building the capacity of link and support workers to promote digital confidence and literacy among mental health consumers.
 - Financial support for people experiencing mental and financial distress that impacts their ability to afford devices, internet or data.

Recommendation 3: Digital trust and safety

- **Digital safety is a key challenge for digital users that can have profound impacts on mental health and wellbeing.** For example, 88 per cent of First Nations Peoples surveyed in 2018 reported having witnessed racism towards First Nations Peoples on social media^{xiii}. The work that the eSafety Commissioner and Australian Human Rights Commission have done to work with impacted groups on resources to support the community, caregivers and professionals is important but there is far more to be done.
- Digital inclusion must also consider the role of trust and safety in the context of social media. The Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society is due to release an interim report in August 2024 that examines the influence and impacts of social media on Australian society. Beyond Blue's recent submission, developed in partnership with Black Dog Institute and ReachOUT, explores how any attempts to regulate young peoples' access to social media must be cognisant of the vital role virtual spaces play, particularly for marginalised groups. For example, research conducted by the eSafety Commissioner demonstrated that social media is a vital tool for LGBTIQ+^{xiv} and First Nations^{xv} young people for exploring identity and self-expression, online civic engagement, finding affirming communities and accessing life-saving information.
- While young people are exposed to harmful content, safety risks and online abuse^{xvi}, they possess sophisticated digital skills and are often able to navigate mixed online experiences with nuance. Digital technology creates safe virtual spaces for young people from marginalised backgrounds to connect, express themselves and feel understood. Any attempts to strengthen online safety must therefore be co-designed with young people to ensure such efforts do not inadvertently isolate people from necessary supports, communities and information.
- **Improving digital trust and safety for people experiencing poor mental health can be achieved through local collaboration with the eSafety Commissioner's work in partnering with technology companies to anticipate, detect and eliminate online risk.** [Safety by Design](#) is an eSafety initiative working with investors, financial entities, start-ups, enterprise companies and the tertiary sector to make digital spaces more inclusive.
- Digital trust and safety are paramount for those seeking mental health support, as fear of privacy breaches can deter individuals from accessing essential services. **The NSW Government should allocate targeted funding for not-for-profit organisations, particularly those who hold sensitive information, to protect against cybercrime and invest in building robust cybersecurity.**
- There are currently limited digital inclusion initiatives that account for the specific needs for people experiencing mental health challenges, and how they can be equipped and supported to access digital technologies for their mental health care and everyday life activities^{xvii}. Further work is needed to improve the provision of digital tools in mental health care, with more practical digital inclusion initiatives to ensure equal access for all. **We recommended engaging with communities with lived and living experience of mental ill-health through established channels, such as Beyond Blue's Blue Voices**

community. If digital exclusion is not addressed, the gap between people with and those without digital skills or access to technology will continue to grow, exacerbating mental health inequalities.

Recommendation 4: Applying a person-centred approach

- The proposed pillars of digital ability, affordability, accessibility, connectivity and digital trust and safety capture the right themes for strategic action to promote digital inclusion. However, it should be noted that **people often experience multiple barriers under each of these pillars**, as well as intersecting forms of marginalisation and/or disadvantage. When these challenges accumulate, they can be more difficult to overcome and increase a person’s risk of experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing.
- The Strategy, while using these pillars to sort or theme actions aimed at addressing digital exclusion, should remain person-centred and responsive to the fact that the human experience cannot be neatly categorised.
- Digital exclusion intersects with other experiences of marginalisation and disadvantage. People who are digitally excluded are also likely to be at higher risk of mental ill-health. Based on data from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), this includes people on low incomes, those who have not completed secondary school, people living in rural and remote areas and First Nations Peoples.
- Conversely, digital inclusion is increasingly being described as a ‘key vehicle to social and economic inclusion’^{xviii} and a determinant of health given it can enable access to mental health promoting services, resources and opportunities. Through this lens, it is that digital inclusion is a human rights, social justice and public health issue.
- People with poor mental health frequently experience digital exclusion for a number of reasons, such as perceived loss of community infrastructure when unwell, negative experiences online, complexity of digital platforms, lack of access to digital equipment and data, mistrust and a lack of opportunity or learn or re-refresh digital skills^{xix}. A survey of people experiencing poor mental health^{ibid} found that digital exclusion has significant consequences, such as reduced social connectedness, negative perceptions of self, disempowerment, and flow-in impacts on wider determinants of health.
- Beyond Blue’s Community Inclusion Guide was developed to ensure our resources, programs, services and supports reflect the diversity of the community and offer people an inclusive experience. **Core to the Guide is the emphasis on recognising the intersectionality of people’s experiences and the importance of designing with inclusion in mind from the beginning.** The experiences of marginalised communities are not mutually exclusive, and acknowledging this interconnectedness is crucial for designing services in a meaningfully inclusive way.

Recommendation 5: Co-design of solutions

- **Extending digital inclusion to everyone in NSW will require an investment in genuine, meaningful co-design processes** that account for the time required to build and foster relationships and considers the variety of experiences and needs of different community groups and members. Only through considered engagement that embeds community voices into every stage of the design process will any efforts deliver effective outcomes for the people they are intended to support.
- Beyond Blue’s Blue Voices program consists of over 5,800 community members nationally who have a lived or living experience of anxiety, depression and/or suicide. Blue Voices participants provide invaluable insights that help inform policy and improve mental health and suicide prevention services and programs. **Meaningfully engaging with Blue Voices is one way the NSW Government could centre community voices** at the heart of the design process to ensure the NSW Digital Inclusion Strategy considers and designs for the experiences of people living with mental ill-health.

Recommendation 6: First Nations partnerships

- Continued and genuine efforts to work in partnership with First Nations communities to close the digital gap are needed, including as outlined in the [First Nations Digital Inclusion Plan](#) and informed by data on the scale and nature of the digital gap by remoteness through the [Mapping the Digital Gap](#) project. To build an inclusive digital future, it is essential to prioritise equitable access, affordability and digital ability for First Nations communities, empowering them to fully participate in and shape the digital future. We are encouraged to see the commitment to working in partnership with the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations and BlaQ Aboriginal Corporation to address digital inclusion gaps for First Nations communities as part of Target 17 of the Closing the Gap commitments. Developing a digital baseline, evaluation framework and digital inclusion roadmap are positive steps toward supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations communities.
- In addition to this, **initiatives that promote First Nations children's access to health and mental health information are critical.** The digital world is a vital source of health information and emotional support for First Nations children with 31 per cent of First Nations children searching for mental health information for themselves or someone they know, compared with 13 per cent of Australian children over all^{xx}.
- **We strongly recommend investing in a regulatory approach that works collaboratively with the private sector (e.g. social media companies) to reduce harms online, such as online bullying, racism, discrimination and hate speech, to improve digital safety and protect mental wellbeing.** Research demonstrates that First Nations children are more likely to have been exposed to a range of potentially harmful experiences which can negatively impact their mental health, schoolwork, and other aspects of their social and emotional lives^{xxi}. It is crucial that new Online Safety Act 2021 can robustly protect against the multipronged dangers of online racism.
- In January 2023, the Minister for Communications announced that the Australian Government would introduce new laws to provide the independent regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), with new powers to combat online misinformation and disinformation. Following a consultation period that ended in the August 2023, the new legislation has yet to come into effect. **There is an opportunity for the NSW Government to collaborate with the Minister for Communications to ensure this legislation comprehensively addresses and eliminates the harm to First Nations communities caused by misinformation and disinformation,** the consequences of which were exemplified and amplified in the lead up to and after the Voice to Parliament referendum.
- We strongly recommend investing in programs and infrastructure that cater to the diverse needs of First Nations communities, addressing varying levels of digital literacy and access methods to promote digital inclusion and equity. Evidence from the Australia Digital Inclusion Index and reports like "Connecting on Country"^{xxii} highlight the significant digital divide within these communities, particularly in remote areas, with lower scores in access, affordability, and digital ability. Additionally, addressing concerns about shared device usage and privacy, especially in the context of sensitive mental health data, is crucial to fostering trust and promoting safe online engagement within First Nations communities.

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