

DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT INSIGHTS PAPER

OCTOBER 2021





INTRODUCTION

‘Digital empowerment’ means having agency, ability and command of the internet, smart devices and other technology which enables everyone to thrive in the digital world.

Digital empowerment is a leading issue for communities and policymakers globally, due to the ever-expanding significance of technology in society. Despite this, it is often presumed that digital infrastructure, devices, software and data are the only building blocks of a digitally enabled society. Experience, however, clearly indicates that *people* need to be at the centre of technological design.

Amid a global digital revolution, where technology itself seems to set the pace, the concept of digital empowerment is underappreciated. The COVID-19 pandemic brought this concept into stark focus. When lockdowns pushed vast portions of the world to living and working online, the gaps between the digital haves and have-nots, the skilled and unskilled, the connected and disconnected, the empowered and disempowered, are patent and unmistakable.

This Paper is a summary of a longer Discussion Paper which extends the City’s appreciation of digital inclusion, equity and empowerment. Ultimately, the summary and discussion papers will guide further research, policy development and program delivery, all aimed at positioning the City of Casey as a digitally empowered city.

STATEMENT OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The City of Casey proudly acknowledges the traditional owners, Casey’s Aboriginal communities and their rich culture and pays respect to their Elders past, present and future. We acknowledge Aboriginal people as Australia’s first peoples and as the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we work and live.

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

The City of Casey is home to a remarkable diversity of cultures, languages, faiths, identities, landscapes, and stories. From our first Australians to our most recent arrivals and every wave between, the City of Casey welcomes and represents all community members and their respective ambitions to live healthy, rewarding, and happy lives. These intersecting and overlapping community stories form Casey’s collective identity and contribute to its evolving, rich history. We recognise this diversity as our strength and we aim to share, nurture, and celebrate it.



TIS: 131450 (Translating and Interpreting Service)

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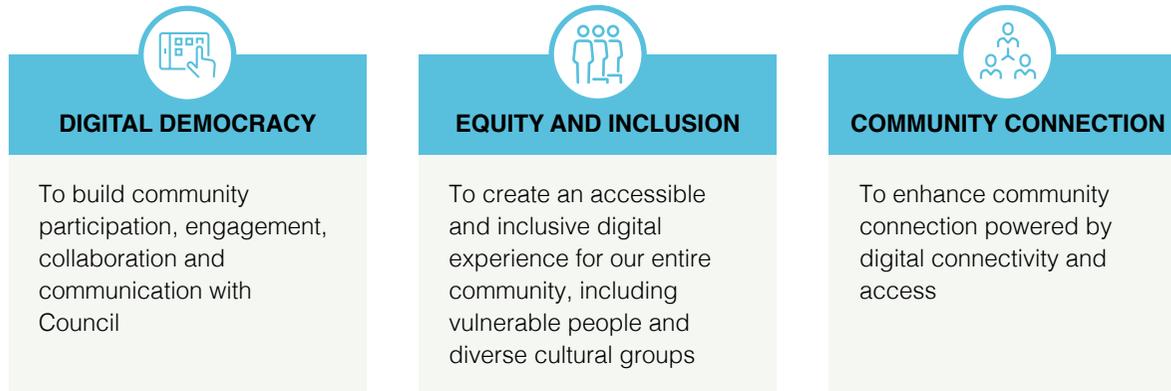
“IT IS NOT MORE **DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY** THAT IS THE ULTIMATE **OBJECTIVE**, BUT MORE **OPPORTUNITY** FOR TECHNOLOGY TO **BENEFIT MORE PEOPLE.**”

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT

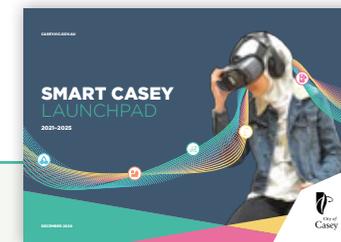
Digital empowerment, while still an evolving concept, is emerging as a significant point of policy discussion and formulation, at all levels of government in Australia and internationally. The City of Casey is on the front-foot, working to drive digital leadership, inclusion and empowerment via the *Smart Casey Launchpad* and *Digital Equity Framework*.

The Smart Casey Launchpad was adopted in late 2020 and defines the approach to coordinating and inspiring smart city action that will build resilience, inclusion and sustainability in the region. Central themes during the smart city community engagement included digital inclusion and digital democracy which represent key aspects of the overall concept of digital empowerment.

This shaped one of the five focus areas of the Smart Casey Launchpad, ‘Connecting Communities.’ The objectives of this focus area are:



Exploring these objectives in the context of digital empowerment ensures greater program outcomes for the **Smart Casey Launchpad**. This is achieved by drawing on global best practice and investigating challenges and opportunities that impact the unique needs of the Casey community. The Paper also informed the **Digital Equity Framework** providing a strong research lens at a global and local scale to ensure greater community outcomes.



Read the **Smart Casey Launchpad**



Read the **Digital Equity Framework**

EMERGING POLICY MATTERS

The Digital Empowerment Paper raises a range of policy discussions that will be of critical importance to address across all levels of Government. Key policy issues to address include those in Table 1.

Table 1: Policy issues for casey

Digital democracy	How do we continue to strengthen our local democratic processes and institutions to make better use of digital technology and enhance public participation in governance?
Co-design	What are the best methods of working with the community to imagine, design, test and improve local digital services?
Digital literacy	How should we measure local digital skills and literacy and address identified gaps?
Access	What are the local barriers to accessing digital tech, and how do we overcome them?
Partnership	Can we work effectively with other governments and the technology sector to promote digital empowerment outcomes?
Security and misinformation	What role can government play to create safe online experiences and repair digital misinformation?
Health	How do we best safeguard the community from the potential negative health impacts?





**A MORE
CONNECTED, BOLD
AND RESILIENT
COMMUNITY.**

CHALLENGES AND RISKS

The dynamic digital world can often lead to several challenges and risks to the level of digital empowerment in Casey. Some of these are set out below.

DIGITAL EXCLUSION

Digital empowerment encapsulates the full realisation of the benefits of the digital world in people’s lives.

Digital equity and digital inclusion are the building blocks of digital empowerment; the achievement of digital inclusion and digital equity are necessary steps to achieving digital empowerment.

Digital exclusion can be broken down into three key areas seen below. These factors can act as obstacle for members of the community to interact with the digital world¹.

ACCESS	AFFORDABILITY	ABILITY
<p>Is there necessary infrastructure in place for an actor to be digitally empowered?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Internet access > Internet technology > Data allowance 	<p>Does the actor have the necessary resource to be digitally empowered?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Relative expenditure > Value of expenditure 	<p>Does the actor have the skills and motivation to be digitally empowered?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Attitudes > Basic skills > Activities

MANAGING MOBILE AND INTERNET ACCESS

For Casey, one of the biggest drivers for digital exclusion is the provision of quality internet and mobile coverage across the City, particularly in new estates. For many of the growth suburbs, including Clyde and Clyde North, there are significant internet and mobile blackspots.

With the shift to online working and studying, it is important to elevate the need for quality connectivity to the same level as other utilities and include this critical infrastructure in the planning and implementation of new estates.

DATA SECURITY AND PRIVACY

The pervasive nature of new technology in conjunction with fears around privacy and data security can, for some, be a major barrier to interacting with the digital world. This inhibition to enter the digital world lowers digital empowerment across the community.

For many in the community, the security and privacy of data that belongs or relates to them is a major concern. Whilst this risk has existed from the inception of digital technology, it has become increasingly high-profile as people begin to understand the value of their data both commercially and personally. This issue is particularly impactful upon already disempowered community members who do not have the knowledge or tools to secure their data, leaving them vulnerable to data and security breaches.

Whilst much of the concern around privacy and data security is valid, and the associated risks real, a degree of misinformation often reinforces these legitimate fears. Promoting a better understanding of genuine security and privacy dangers and how to mitigate them will contribute to a higher level of digital empowerment.

The City of Casey acknowledges the high importance of digital security and privacy. Casey continues to promote best practice cyber-security for local business, residents and for Council itself. Regular policy review and strengthening is key to ensuring they meet community expectations and best practice standards.

1. Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII)

“DIGITAL EXCLUSION IS OFTEN **PRESUMED** TO BE AN AFFLICTION OF ONLY THE **ELDERLY, UNEDUCATED MEMBERS** OF THE **COMMUNITY**, OR THOSE WHO CHOOSE TO **RESIST TECHNOLOGICAL** PROGRESS.”

TECHNOLOGY AND RAPID CHANGE

A further risk for digital empowerment and the adoption of technology in Casey is the incredible speed of technological change. One such risk is the associated rate at which the digital divide (the gap between the empowered and disempowered) expands with technological progress. This has been recognised by governments around the world as a priority in the public facing technological agenda:

“We recognize that digital poverty is poverty. Period.”
 – John Paul Farmer, Chief Technology Office of New York City

The pace of development also challenges regulators and law makers, who are constantly pushed to keep up with technological capability. For example, the invention of Airbnb and other accommodation platforms has challenged local zoning laws and regulations.

Regardless of the future of technology trends, there is no doubt that the speed of technology has a major impact on digital empowerment. When not carefully monitored and addressed through innovative solutions to improve knowledge and skills within the community, the gap between the empowered and disempowered widens at every technological advance.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The ‘attention economy’ refers to the business of gaining, and ultimately selling, the attention of consumers. It encompasses the social media industry and most online entertainment platforms². These businesses operate by capturing and holding the attention of consumers. This attention is then monetised, or sold, to a third party, generally in the form of advertisements.

“When driven by profit, technology accelerates existential risk. When technology is governed by the people, designed to serve society, it can be an enormous enabler of well-being.”³

The profit-making incentives of companies in the attention economy can have a negative impact on the health of consumers. The monetisation of consumers’ attention has directly incentivised social media and digital entertainment companies to hold the attention of users for as long as possible. This is well understood in the community and can be identified as a risk to physical, mental and societal health as identified below:

Table 2: Health risks Associated with the attention economy⁴

Mental	Depression	Addiction	Social Anxiety	Low Self-esteem
Physical	Poor Health Habits	Poor Sleep	Lack of Exercise	Substance Abuse
Societal	Social Division	Negative Discourse	Issue Polarisation	Reduced Interaction

2. Millington, 2017
 3. One Project, 2020
 4. Harris, 2021



KEY OPPORTUNITIES

Examples of positive outcomes arising from improved digital empowerment around the world and locally are many and varied.

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

The use of technology to support democratic institutions and promote community engagement and deliberation is known as digital democracy⁵. Many of the best examples of digital democracy have been developed and enacted by local governments and have translated into improved and refined democratic models.

The emergence of digital democracy initiatives challenges the perceptions that technology is a threat to democratic society. Some of the benefits delivered by digital democracy are:

- > Citizens better informed about local policies and projects
- > Higher levels of civic participation
- > Deliberative decision making
- > More direct accountability for elected representatives
- > Increased inclusion and a more diverse range of civic participants
- > Technological innovations leveraged in managing COVID-19

INCLUSIVE DIGITAL DESIGN

Inclusive design is a principle extended into the digital world from its traditionally non-technological roots. It refers to designing systems, products and solutions with a diverse range of users in mind. Understanding the diversity of users allows designers to include as many people as possible as potential users of their product⁶.

Understanding user diversity takes on particular importance for local governments, where the community presents a broad range of customer needs, interests and abilities. Furthermore, governments are driven by an obligation to serve all members of the community, where inclusive digital design of services and experiences provides a framework for inclusion, leading to digital empowerment.

5. Digital Democracy, 2019
6. Cambridge University, 2021
7. Bhargava & Velasquez, 2020
8. Digital Democracy, 2019

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Global not-for-profit organisations such as the *Center for Humane Technology* and the *One Project* are focussing efforts on educating social media users and developing public debate on the issue. A well-informed consumer is more likely to participate in the attention economy in a healthy way, and by doing so mitigate the risk that the attention economy poses to digital empowerment.⁷

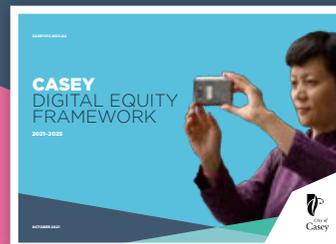
NEUTRAL PLATFORMS FOR COMMUNITY CONNECTION

There is a growing community need to have online spaces beyond the social media giants' platforms that provide opportunities for community connection, stimulation and inclusion. Facebook, Instagram and other sites often breed division within communities and moderation is complicated. An emerging opportunity is to provide a digital 'third space' to the community similar to the physical Community Hubs concept that enables community to form and grow based on their own interests and passions.

“THE POTENTIAL OF **DIGITAL DEMOCRACY** LIES IN ITS (DIGITAL) ABILITY TO INCREASE **DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION, EMBRACE DIVERSITY OF OPINION AND EMPOWER MARGINALISED GROUPS.**”⁸

CASEY'S DIGITAL EQUITY FRAMEWORK

In response to digital exclusion, Casey developed a **Digital Equity Framework** to outline how to improve digital access, affordability and ability across the City.



CITY OF CASEY

CURRENT CITY OF CASEY ACTIONS

The levers that City of Casey has at hand can address the community need of digital empowerment. The City of Casey has, and will continue to, exemplify leadership in this area, and guide the local community to higher levels of digital empowerment.

The City of Casey has a number of programs that are designed to increase digital inclusion, equity and empowerment.

Across all aspects of the digital empowerment landscape, the opportunities presented by digital technology overpower the risks. That is not to say that the risks are insignificant or unimportant. With considered mitigation, however, and concerted efforts across the community to drive digital empowerment, the possibilities and advantages in social, economic and democratic terms far outweigh the risk of regress to any of these areas



DIGITAL ACTIVATION PROGRAM

Council developed this Program to overcome social isolation and digital exclusion caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has enabled social connection and helped vulnerable populations secure essential services through digital channels. This also enabled interaction with loved ones and access to critical online services. The program overcame three critical barriers to digital empowerment: internet access, device access, and digital literacy skills.

GET CONNECTED

The program was created to support our community's most vulnerable groups, including them in the digital world. The program increased access to devices, provided one-on-one support and taught participants valuable digital literacy skills and tools.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY HUB

A pilot of a virtual Community Hub is underway to provide an online experience of a Community Hub where residents can meet and chat together, form special interest groups and promote positive community connections.

FREE WI-FI AND SMART FURNITURE

To tackle access and affordability challenges faced by residents and visitors to the Aboriginal Gathering Place in Doveton, Casey provided simple and effective access to 24/7 public Wi-Fi and device charging.

SMART CASEY LAUNCHPAD

The *Smart Casey Launchpad* is Casey's approach to coordinating and inspiring smart city action that will build resilience, inclusion and sustainability in Casey. The Launchpad reflects Casey's desire to create digital equity and increase inclusion throughout our community.

IMPACT LEVERS

Digital empowerment is a priority for the City of Casey. While digital empowerment depends on everyone, the City of Casey recognises that local government plays an important role. Some of the levers which the City will employ and continue to explore are noted below.

Table 3: City of Casey Impact levers

ROLE	DETAIL
Organisational Strategy and Capacity Building	Digital empowerment in organisations comes down to digital strategy, digital transformation and capacity-building. The City of Casey has direct control of this policy lever and has already made significant advances as a digitally empowered Council.
Leadership	As democratic and administrative leaders of the community, the City can shape and direct discussion about digital empowerment, and lead by example.
Communication	Digital empowerment often depends upon the communication of information and knowledge. The City has the connections and relationships to facilitate this process.
Policies	This Paper highlights a vast range of opportunities to strengthen government, community and industry policies to increase digital empowerment.
Programs	The City has already designed and delivered several programs to meet local needs and will continue to review and improve such efforts.
Advocacy	Where the City does not hold relevant policy and funding levers to increase digital empowerment, it can still work as an advocate to inform policy debate and influence decision makers.
Collaboration	Digital empowerment is a complex, multi-dimensional, multi-stakeholder issue. As a collaborator, connector and coordinator, the City can help untangle and progress the opportunities and challenges of empowerment in the digital world.

Figure 1: ADII Victorian Regions (*Sample size <150, exercise caution in interpretation)

IMPACT OF COMMUNITY LEADERS

Various sectors and organisations across Casey can have a meaningful impact on the level of digital empowerment in our community and help steer us towards a desirable digital future.

+ **Community organisations** can extend their traditional roles in advocacy, engagement, and project delivery in the community. These roles are easily adaptable to the digital world. Projects can not only be adjusted to include digital infrastructure, but directly address digital empowerment.

Community organisations should focus on adapting their traditional role to include a focus on the digital world.

+ **Education providers** in the community can also have a direct impact on digital empowerment. This can range from the provision of necessary tools such as networks and devices, to the structure and content of courses including a focus on reducing the digital divide.

Educators can have an immediate and meaningful impact on digital empowerment, from pre-primary to post-graduate levels.

+ **Businesses** too can be active in this space through public-private partnerships and direct impact in relation to their staff and stakeholders. Businesses can leverage digital technologies to spread their reach and grow their sphere of stakeholders.

Business partners can both contribute to and benefit from higher levels of digital empowerment. Council aims to partner with interested businesses to raise organisational and community levels of digital empowerment.

USEFUL DEFINITIONS

Digital Empowerment	Agency, ability and command of the internet, smart devices and other technology which enables everyone to thrive in the digital world.
Digital World	The phenomenon of digital technologies growing in all aspects of society.
Digital Channels	Online platforms that enable communication and information sharing.
Digital Technologies	Information and communication technologies (ICT), especially those connected to the internet.
Digital Inclusion	Provision of the activities, strategies and tools necessary for all individuals and communities, focusing mainly on the most disadvantaged, to have access to, and use of, information and communication technologies.
Digital Democracy	The use of digital technology in democratic processes and institutions, existing and new, to improve representation, public discourse, engagement and public deliberation.
Digital Equity	Embedding fairness in the development and implementation of digital systems, where digital tools, opportunities for building skills and confidence, as well as information distribution is tailored according to community need, such that all can participate in our increasingly online society, democracy, and economy

FURTHER READING

The City of Casey is committed to delivering community value through innovation and has a range of resources.

Digital Equity Framework



Smart Casey Launchpad



Smart Casey Launchpad Community Hub



GET INVOLVED

If you would like to partner with Casey or want to learn more about Digital Empowerment, email smartcity@casey.vic.gov.au





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