

# Kensington Neighbourhood House Inc

## Submission to the Select Committee on Cost of Living

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Rebecca Smith  
Manager



89 McCracken Street  
Kensington VIC 3031

Phone: 03 9376 6366

Email: [info@kenhouse.org.au](mailto:info@kenhouse.org.au)

Web: [www.kensingtonneighbourhoodhouse.com](http://www.kensingtonneighbourhoodhouse.com)

## **Cost of Living Crisis: The widening digital divide in our most disadvantaged communities**

### **About Kensington Neighbourhood House**

Kensington Neighbourhood House (KNH) was established in 1975 as a place where people of all abilities, backgrounds and ages can participate in a range of inclusive social, educational and recreational programs.

For nearly 50 years, KNH has given people the confidence to become active citizens, to support each other, alleviate social isolation, and it has provided the opportunity for individual self-expression, social interaction and personal achievement.

Each year we welcome over 1,000 people from over 60 different cultural backgrounds through our doors.

KNH has extensive experience working with vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community.

Our focus is on the provision of programs that provide opportunity for life-long learning. Specifically we offer English language and work skills classes, vocational preparation courses, resume support, form completion assistance, adult education, digital literacy, family literacy, homework clubs, community lunches, personal development, social groups, playgroups and health and wellbeing activities.

### **Our community**

Kensington is a rapidly gentrifying suburb that nevertheless contains significant pockets of disadvantage. 30% of our 10,000 residents live on government benefits or very low incomes. 33% speak languages other than English at home. 10% of households do not have internet connections to their residence.

Many of the people KNH supports live in the Kensington public housing estate. In particular we support families from CALD backgrounds, seniors living alone and many people who have complex physical and mental health needs.

## **The digital divide is bigger than ever**

The digital divide has always existed, however the events of 2020 and 2021 rapidly exacerbated it.

Access to the internet is as essential today as access to electricity or clean water, and yet many, many households do not receive this essential service.

The Victorian lockdowns necessitated a switch to remote working, learning, healthcare and multiple other online functions. Our disadvantaged community members were in no way prepared for this shift.

### **Husna's Story**

Husna lives with her husband and 6 school aged children in a 3 bedroom public housing unit. When lockdowns started, the only internet accessible device in the home was a mobile phone. In addition to 6 children needing to connect to their schools, Husna was in need of regular medical appointments. These also moved online. KNH assisted with lending 2 laptops and a mobile broadband dongle. However the data required to run Zoom calls and hours of remote school classes was cost prohibitive for the family. The younger children missed out on significant amounts of schooling because priority was given to those in secondary school. Likewise, Husna missed multiple medical appointments because attending those online would mean disconnecting the kids from school.

Stories like this played out again and again across Kensington throughout the two years of lockdowns.

Now that we have returned to “normal”, the digital divide continues to adversely affect people's education, health care, and access to multiple services.

### **Amy's Story**

Amy is 23 years old and has been offered a place in a course at RMIT. To enrol, she needed to complete multiple online forms and a lengthy language literacy and numeracy assessment. Living on a disability pension, Amy does not own a laptop and trying to complete her uni enrolment on her phone was impossible. Amy borrowed a laptop from KNH, used her phone as a hotspot and completed her enrolment. She does not yet know how she will manage her study as she cannot afford a computer or wifi connection to her flat.

If you have no access to cost effective wifi and devices in your home, life is a constant struggle.

As evidence of this, Kensington Neighbourhood House currently runs “online assistance” sessions staffed by volunteers for *14 hours every single week*. These sessions are attended by community members needing help with everything from applying for birth certificates for new babies, to completing workplace induction checks, citizenship applications or school enrolments. This service is completely unfunded but vital to support our community.

### **Drop the cost of connecting**

KNH calls on the government to improve the affordability of telecommunications. We support the submission to this Committee from ACCAN and recommend the establishment of:

A concessional broadband service for households receiving government financial support,

- A national strategy for affordable devices,
- An independent wifi plan comparison tool

We support ACCAN’s *No Australian Left Offline* initiative for 50mbps unlimited broadband service offered at a wholesale price of \$20 per month by NBN Co to households receiving government financial support.

### **Conclusion**

All Australians have a right to access essential services and participate fully in society and the economy.

The cost of devices, data and internet connections is prohibitive for a significant portion of the Kensington community and for all other low income earners across the country. This is negatively impacting health, education, employment and social connections for large numbers of people.

Without steps to improve the affordability of telecommunications, we will continue to see an ever- widening gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” in our society.