

Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre Inc Submission to the Select Committee on Cost of Living

03 March 2023

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Cost of Living Crisis: The Cost of Accessing Affordable Internet and Computer Devices

About CNLC

The Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre Inc (CNLC) was established in 2002. CNLC works with those who experience disadvantage, to connect, learn, share skills and improve participation in work and community life. As a Neighbourhood House, Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and Learn Local, CNLC engages with a broad community including public housing residents, migrants and refugees, and people with disabilities.

CNLC provides a range of support for people in need from programs for people with disability, education for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (particularly new migrants and refugees), food relief, social work and employment services to those experiencing disadvantage in the Carlton community.

CNLC is a place where refugees, migrants, people seeking asylum and those living on the public housing estates in Carlton can find support, get help navigating settlement services, and where they can learn and connect.

Why we can speak with authority on cost of living pressures

CNLC works to provide relief in various forms to disadvantaged people living in the Carlton community, by providing support and programs for living and working in Melbourne. The CNLC vision and mission is to create opportunities and challenge disadvantage and inequity for those most in need in the Carlton community.

A significant portion of the people CNLC support live on the Carlton public housing estate. The public housing estate is home to a diverse community of families and individuals, many of whom are on low or no income, elderly people and those who have a disability, or have other complex needs. Carlton has the highest number of public housing dwellings within the City of Melbourne with approximately 854 dwellings and over 3,000 residents. 63% of all Carlton residents were born overseas, and 57% of residents speak a language other than English at home which is higher than the municipal-wide figure of 48%. The median weekly income in Carlton is \$336, with 31% of residents having negative/nil income (ABS). The median Carlton housing estate weekly income is \$211, and 24% of residents speak English either not well or not at all.

The residents who live in the public housing towers in Carlton come from more than dozens of countries and speak many languages and represent multiple faiths. The most spoken languages at home are Somali, Arabic, Mandarin as well as Vietnamese, Oromo, Tigrinya, Amharic and Turkish.

54% of our CNLC students studying English as an Additional Language and a range of pre-accredited courses, are living at the Carlton housing public estate and in 2022 a further 9% were from Scape (Afghan & Ukrainian refugees with humanitarian visa). Pre-COVID-19 there was a 48% unemployment rate for residents at the Carlton public housing estate.

Our work on digital access and the closing the digital divide

During the COVID-19 lockdowns in Victoria 2020 – 2021 it became apparent that many CNLC participants had no devices, low digital literacy and lacked digital connection to wi-fi. The impact of the lockdowns on this cohort was immense including being unable to access telehealth appointments, being unable to participate in education, and being socially isolated from support networks. The COVID-19 pandemic has only accentuated the discrepancy experienced by marginalised community members to have access to what many take for granted in being digitally connected. The debilitating impacts of the digital divide are a daily occurrence for our participants.

Community Agencies for Digital Inclusion

CNLC initiated a network of ten neighbourhood houses and ten other allies to form the Community Agencies for Digital Inclusion network (CADI) which included Local Councils, Universities and NBN Co to highlight the needs of public housing residents.

CADI advocate that public housing tenants should have high speed, reliable, affordable internet access and the infrastructure needed to provide that. We have combined our expertise to advocate to State and Federal politicians on the unique impact the digital divide has on residents, especially cost of living pressures and challenges around accessibility. A joint budget bid was made to the Victorian State Government based on PBO costings for public housing tenants to access subsidised Wi-Fi for \$20 a month for 50mbps.

Each of the CADI agencies have tried to help bridge the digital divide on the ground. This is unfunded yet critical work for people living in our area.

CNLC partners with the University of Melbourne and distributes on average twenty refurbished computers a month to families in need.

We train skilled digital mentors to work with participants to learn the basics of computer skills as well as deliver pre-accredited computer courses.

CNLC partnered with the University of Melbourne to undertake research [*Understanding Digital Inequality: An analysis of unequal connectivity in Carlton Housing Estate*](#)¹. This research validated people's experience of high costs and low access impacts on their daily lives significantly.

¹ Understanding digital inequality (unimelb.edu.au)

“This report provides an insight into the lived experiences of people in public housing towers, who experience significant digital inequality at a time when internet access is required for most forms of participation in society,” Lead researcher Dr Dulfer said.

The issues

In addition to supporting the submission put forward by ACAN, we would like to make a number of points and provide some personal case studies of people we have worked with.

CASE STUDY 1

Fatma has lived in Australia for 23 years after fleeing Somalia and surviving a Kenyan refugee camp. Fatma is not in paid employment and is a single mother of seven children aged nine to 24. When the pandemic broke out and everyone had to stay at home and do home schooling and Fatma did not know what to do.

Her daughter in year 11 begged her mum to buy a laptop for her. Fatma went to the shop and asked if she could buy it by paying it off month by month. When they said her credit rating would not allow this Fatma cried in the store. She finally got gifted a computer from CNLC where she studies English which she gave to her daughter.

Her son in year 10 does not have a computer to work on. Fatma tries to get his sister to share but often it is impractical.

For Fatma herself, who needs to continue to study English, she uses her mobile phone. She attends all her English classes on Zoom and has to switch to google to look up vocabulary. She writes her assignments on her phone. She doesn't want to give up her English classes because she hopes one day soon to get a part time job to support her family and needs her English skills to be improved.

CNLC has supported Fatma and her family as much as possible. We are also engaging with other agencies to make sure that Fatma's situation is not just seen as an individual case but is advocated as a common issue that is holding back multiple generations. This is a critical issue that can be addressed and would make such a positive change to the long term outcomes of people's lives.

CNLC wants to draw the Committee's attention to the cost of living crisis and the challenges faced by low-income individuals, particularly migrants and refugees in accessing affordable internet and computer devices. The high cost of accessing these essential services is a significant barrier to full participation in society and the economy.

The cost of living in Australia has risen significantly in recent years, making it increasingly difficult for low-income individuals to make ends meet. For many people

in the Carlton area, internet access and computer devices are critical tools for accessing essential services such as government services, applying for jobs, and staying connected with family and friends.

However, the cost of these services is often prohibitively high, making them inaccessible to many low-income individuals. Many of the people we work with at CNLC, particularly migrants and refugees, simply cannot afford the cost of internet and computer devices. This situation is particularly acute given the impact of COVID-19 on the economy, which has left many people out of work or on reduced incomes.

CASE STUDY 2

Hodan lives in Carlton with her four children, all under the age of 10 with three attending primary school. Her children attend a private religious school on scholarship. Their school do not provide any computers for her children's learning and she is not in a financial position to buy any.

The younger two children now record their school work as audio files each day on their mum's phone. They then send the audio files off to their teacher at the end of each day. Hodan said "It's exhausting – we do it in shifts and I dread that someone will ring me and interrupt."

Proposals to address Digital Exclusion

It is critical that the government takes steps to improve the affordability of telecommunications and make meaningful changes to people's lives who experience disadvantage. CNLC support the ACCAN recommendations for the government to establish:

- A concessional broadband service for households receiving government financial support
- A national strategy for affordable devices
- An independent 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

We believe that the government has a critical role to play in addressing this issue. We would like to see the government provide subsidies for low-income individuals to access internet and computer devices. This could include providing funding to community organisations such as CNLC to distribute low-cost or refurbished computer devices, or direct subsidies to individuals to help them pay for internet and computer services.

We believe that providing these subsidies would have a significant positive impact on the lives of low-income individuals and families in the Carlton area and across the country. It would help to ensure that all Australians can access essential services and participate fully in the economy and society.