

1 December 2021

Ms Fiona Patten MLC
Chair
Parliament of Victoria
Legislative Assembly, Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Chair

I am writing to you in relation to the Victorian Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into support for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

As Australia's national independent regulator for online safety, eSafety leads, coordinates, educates and advises on online safety issues and aims to empower all Australians to have safer, more positive online experiences.

Through the key pillars of protection, prevention and proactive and systemic change, eSafety's aim is to minimise harm online.

eSafety's role in relation to the Inquiry

We deliver a wide range of programs and resources to cater for all Australians. In the context of this inquiry, I want to highlight how eSafety sees digital ability and safety as being critical components to support older Australians and those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. I would also like to highlight the important work we have undertaken in this space to help those communities to have safer online experiences.

eSafety undertakes an extensive research program to ensure its programs and resources are evidence based. This equips eSafety with the insights and knowledge it needs to understand the nature of online safety issues and design, implement and evaluate best possible solutions.

The issues and insights raised below draw from eSafety's research program. The full suite of eSafety's research reports can be accessed on eSafety's website at <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research>.

At-risk groups

eSafety's research and experience points to the fact that online harms can disproportionately impact certain groups.

This includes, but is not limited to, older people, those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disability and people who identify as LGBTQI+, as well as women more broadly. Additional factors that may place an individual at greater risk of experiencing or being seriously impacted by harmful online content or behaviour include low digital literacy, lack of digital access and lack of digital confidence.

These factors can be intersectional. This means that as these factors combine, they have a cumulative effect to increase an individual's risk of experiencing harm online and being seriously impacted by it.

In addition, there is also a strong link between the inequality, discrimination and disrespect that underpins harms experienced online.

I explore these factors and dynamics and what they mean for older people from culturally linguistically diverse backgrounds, including those from migrant and refugee backgrounds, below.

Online experiences of Older Australians and CALD groups

People from culturally and linguistically diverse communities have a broad range of digital literacy skills. Multicultural young people are often highly digitally connected but there is also evidence of a digital divide between some newly arrived migrant parents and their children. These parents may rely on their children for help using the internet because of insufficient digital knowledge or English proficiency. This can make it more difficult to effectively assess and monitor their children's online safety. Lower levels of English proficiency also correlate with higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage.

For many older Australians, including those from CALD backgrounds, the online world is a vital source of information and connection and a way to access services like online banking and support from government services.

Age is one of the strongest determinants for lower digital participation. Some older Australians are highly digitally literate and active online, while others struggle to engage with the digital world.

A 2018 national survey, conducted as part of eSafety's Understanding digital behaviours of older Australians report¹, explored the digital participation and literacy amongst Australians aged 50 years or older. The research identified differing digital literacy levels among older Australians, as broken down below:

- 36% had higher levels relative to others in their age range - defined as those who perform online transactions at least once a week.
- 31% had moderate levels relative to others in their age group - defined as those who perform online transactions less frequently than once a week.
- 26% had low levels relative to others in their age group - defined as those who perform online activities no more than once a month.

¹ <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-08/Understanding-digital-behaviours-older-Australians-summary-report-2018.pdf>

- Nearly 8% were digitally disengaged - defined as non-internet users who never perform online activities.

The research also explored the impacts of being digitally excluded or disengaged. It can mean that older people are restricted in their ability to connect with family and friends, conduct business or access key online services.

Lower levels of digital participation and access in people aged 50 and over correlate with lower incomes and whether people were required to use the internet for work. A higher proportion of older people living in regional areas, from CALD backgrounds, older people with disability and women also have lower levels of digital literacy.

Older Australians have faced some of the greatest challenges to accessing health, welfare and business services online, and maintaining social connection, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. And yet, they are least equipped to deal with the mass shift to life online.

However, crucially, the research also showed there is significant level of interest among older Australians to acquire new digital skills, in the context of building trust and confidence in the internet and addressing real online safety and security concerns. Those respondents who identified an interest in learning identified a range of activities for future skill development. These generally fell into four key areas with safety (including security) foundational to participation in all other areas:

- safety (e.g. privacy settings, paying safely online)
- managing data/files (e.g. data usage at home and on the move, backing up and retrieving files)
- location/data sharing (e.g. using Wi-Fi safely, GPS and Bluetooth)
- services and interests (e.g. undertaking a range of activities and interests such as researching family history online).

eSafety has a range of initiatives and programs targeted directly towards improving the digital literacy of older Australians, which, as with all of eSafety's work, take an intersectional approach.

eSafety work in this space

As set out in our Protecting Voices at Risk Online 2020 report², eSafety undertakes a number of key initiatives to support older Australians and those from CALD backgrounds.

These initiatives are informed by consultation with representative groups, feedback from our programs in the field and qualitative research such as Encouraging the Digital Participation of Older Australians Through Mentoring (2019)³. They include:

² <https://www.esafety.gov.au/diverse-groups/protecting-voices-risk-online>

³ <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-07/BeConnected%20intergeneration%20research%20report.pdf>

- **Be Connected** - Be Connected is the Australian government's award-winning digital literacy program designed to increase the digital literacy and confidence of older Australians aged 50+ who have had minimal or no engagement with technology. The program has reached over 1 million learners and delivered over 500 learning resources, including tip sheets which are translated into 8 languages. The Be Connected website, managed by eSafety, supports face-to-face and interactive online training. An independent evaluation of the program⁴ conducted by Swinburne University found that Be Connected has delivered a positive social return on investment, with \$4.01 created in social value for every \$1 invested. The program has created an additional \$229.5 million in social value between the launch in October 2017 and February 2020. The evaluation also found a significant reduction in loneliness over the time that learners were involved with the program. Survey participants also indicated that their social connectedness has increased as a result of their ability to connect with family and friends digitally.
- **Intergenerational mentoring** — Be Connected Young Mentors is a program that facilitates the transfer of digital skills and online safety advice from young mentors to older Australians.
- **Online safety advice and support** — the Seniors section of the eSafety website provides easily findable, tailored online safety advice and support for older Australians, as well as advice for dealing with adult cyber abuse and image-based abuse.
- **Culturally and linguistically diverse older Australians** — resources in community languages as well as new in-language access pages for all translated content.
- **Grandparents** — a guide to online safety for grandparents and carers outlining key online safety advice for older Australians and children in their care.

Further information about the above-mentioned resources can be found at

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/seniors>. Additional programs and areas of work also include:

- **All people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds** — easy-to-read online safety advice in English; key online safety resources translated into 22 different languages on eSafety's website. See <https://www.esafety.gov.au/diverse-groups/cultural-linguistic/translations>.
- **Women:** eSafety has delivered qualitative research looking into experiences of technology-facilitated abuse among women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds⁵ and has a range of resources to help these communities suffering from Technology-Facilitated Abuse.

⁴ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03_2021/improving-digital-inclusion-older-australians-social-impact-be-connected-16-june-2020.pdf

⁵ <https://www.esafety.gov.au/research/women-from-diverse-backgrounds>

- **Islamic communities** — we have worked with community organisations to tailor resources about adult cyber abuse and image-based abuse, to provide advice and raise awareness of these issues within the community.

I want to briefly touch on two upcoming online safety developments that are of note in the context of this inquiry.

Our Safety by Design initiative aims to drive up standards of user safety in the technology community. The next phase of the initiative will focus on ensuring the needs of diverse and at-risk groups are effectively considered, incorporated and actioned within Safety by Design. We'll be engaging through sessions with at-risk groups for this purpose.

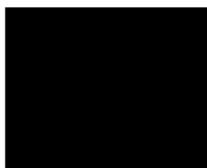
More broadly, the *Online Safety Act 2021* (Cth) (Act) will commence on 23 January 2022. This will strengthen and enhance eSafety's powers and functions. This includes the establishment of a formal complaints and investigations scheme for adult cyber abuse material. This will provide important protection for adult Australians, including older Australians from migrant and refugee backgrounds, who experience serious abuse online.

Concluding remarks

In closing, I want to reiterate the benefits and challenges to older Australians engaging online safety and confidently. Digital literacy must be considered in understanding the needs, challenges and access to services of older Australians from CALD backgrounds. Crucially, promoting and raising digital literacy amongst this cohort can also be a way to increase their wellbeing, foster social connections and enhance their social and civic participation.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into this important issue.

Yours sincerely



Rebecca Razavi
Acting Commissioner, eSafety