

Report to the Future Melbourne Committee**Agenda item 6.2****Improve internet access in City of Melbourne's community facilities and for hard to reach groups****13 June 2023****Presenter:** Katrina McKenzie, General Manager City Economy and Activation**Purpose and background**

1. The purpose of Council's Major Initiative 43 is to deliver programs that will build digital literacy skills and capabilities; improve access to free Wi-Fi from City of Melbourne's community facilities; and advocate for appropriate digital infrastructure to improve digital inclusion for all, particularly hard to reach groups. This aligns with Council's strategic objective: 'Access and Affordability', which is focused on reducing economic and social inequality by ensuring universal access to core services and information. The United Nations Sustainability Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) also relate to Major Initiative 43.
2. A lack of internet access and low digital literacy have been identified by many organisations, including the World Health Organisation, as a key cause for decreased community participation and reduced health, safety and wellbeing outcomes. This 'digital divide' poses a significant challenge to improving economic and social equality for Melburnians.
3. Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/> is a collaboration between the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society at RMIT, the Centre for Social Impact Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra. ADII is a relative measure of inclusion. Using a score of 0-100, it compares the degree to which individuals are considered more digitally included than others based on three dimensions: Access, Affordability, and Digital Ability. Individuals are considered digitally 'excluded' when they fail to meet one or more of the three dimensions. Even though the ADII reports that residents of the municipality have a strong Digital Inclusion score at 77 per cent, which is 5.9 per cent points above the national average, and 4.9 per cent above the state average, there are still people who are digitally excluded in the municipality.
4. Council's Major Initiative 43 is consistent with the ADII in its aim to improve access to free Wi-Fi from CoM's community facilities and advocate for appropriate digital infrastructure to improve digital inclusion for all. Surveys of library internet users, digital program attendees, interviews with Community Agencies for Digital Inclusion (CADI) and other stakeholders, internet service providers and Council's Disability Advisory Committee informed the findings of this research, a summary of which is attached (see Attachment 2).

Key issues

5. Overall, it was found that CoM has a program that:
 - 5.1. Supports learning and building digital ability, including outreach through the library's Mel-van which opens up learning opportunities and technical support for people at risk of digital exclusion.
 - 5.2. Actively supports community advocacy via CADI, as well as engaging with telecommunications companies such as Telstra and the National Broadband Network.
 - 5.3. Actively looks to engage partnership opportunities that seek to improve digital inclusion.
 - 5.4. Provides access to good quality free Wi-Fi from its community facilities.
6. As a result of the research undertaken, it is proposed that CoM:
 - 6.1. Develops a three year Digital Inclusion Plan which addresses opportunities to improve access, affordability and digital ability, and brings together all digital inclusion work into one cohesive framework for action.

Recommendation from management

1. That the Future Melbourne Committee approves the development of a Digital Inclusion Plan, to strengthen and extend digital access, inclusion and advocacy, which includes:
 - 1.1. establishing a standard level of Wi-Fi for Council community facilities; this would set the standard for any new Council facility
 - 1.2. exploring a model for the City of Melbourne to support a device donation scheme; allowing hard to reach groups access to devices
 - 1.3. investigating the establishment of a Digital Inclusion Network to bring partners together in a systematic way
 - 1.4. developing a system of capturing and sharing data that measures impact from activity focused on improving digital inclusion to drive a planned and evidence-based approach to reducing exclusion.

Attachments:

1. Supporting attachment (Page 3 of 12)
2. Summary of Research (Page 4 of 12)

Supporting Attachment

Legal

1. No direct legal implications arise from the recommendation from management.

Finance

2. Initiation of a Digital Inclusion Plan can be achieved within the existing 2023–24 budget. Future budget implications to deliver actions identified within a Digital Inclusion Plan are yet to be fully determined.

Conflict of interest

3. No member of Council staff, or other person engaged under a contract, involved in advising on or preparing this report has declared a material or general conflict of interest in relation to the matter of the report.

Health and Safety

4. In developing this proposal, no Occupational Health and Safety issues or opportunities have been identified.

Stakeholder consultation

5. Two surveys informed the research report. A survey of users of CoM Wi-Fi in libraries was undertaken to inform level of digital skills and understand how important CoM Wi-Fi is to them. The second survey was a snapshot from Mel-van users to explore the barriers that exist to access and understand if outreach built digital confidence in participants.

Relation to Council policy

6. Strategic objective: Access and Affordability. Major Initiative 43: Digital literacy programs and digital inclusion.

Environmental sustainability

7. Libraries are committed to achieving and enhancing environment outcomes for the community.

Quality of Wi-Fi in CoM community facilities

1. About the Research

Data was gathered from City of Melbourne (CoM) staff and its Internet Service Provider (ISP), Easyweb Digital, who provided a range of documents and data on partnerships and Wi-Fi usage, as well as providing access to various stakeholders for a series of one-to-one meetings, group discussions and interviews.

Two surveys were undertaken to inform the research. One targeted at current users of CoM Wi-Fi to gain an understanding of digital skills and gain a sense of how important CoM Wi-Fi is to them. The second survey was a snapshot from Mel-van users to explore the barriers that exist to access and to test whether taking part in Mel-van outreach built confidence for participants.

Finally, an analysis of Google reviews of library services was undertaken to gain a snapshot of user opinions in relation to Wi-Fi in particular. Google reviews provide a useful insight into what library users are thinking about particular aspects of the service, being a sizeable volume of freely available data.

Given the level and range of digital inclusion services as well as the provision of free Wi-Fi, CoM Libraries were considered the primary focus of this research. For the purpose of this report libraries have been divided into library only and library and community hub as well as outreach provided by Mel-van.

Free Wi-Fi provided by other council community facilities was also in scope including YMCA managed recreation centres. The latter has limited access mainly for child safety and privacy reasons.

Overall, the research seeks to explore and understand the following questions:

- quality of Wi-Fi in CoM community facilities;
- current and future infrastructure needs for CoM;
- Wi-Fi in CoM facilities that is poor quality or not provided;
- user types of CoM Wi-Fi;
- how users access Wi-Fi at CoM facilities;
- the barriers to people accessing Wi-Fi – quality/device issues, etc;
- partnerships and advocacy opportunities.

2. Libraries

CoM libraries provide Wi-Fi access at high speeds and monitor that with their Internet Service Provider (ISP) on a regular basis.

Usage data provided from Easyweb Digital of CoM free Wi-Fi from 1 March 2022 through to 28 of February 2023 shows the following:

- A total of 23,866 devices accessed the Wi-Fi
- A total traffic of 23.61 TB
- An average download of 279.74 MB
- An average upload of 39.58 MB
- An average session of 1 hour and 6 minutes

This volume and level of usage would indicate that quality is of a consistently high standard. Given that the uptime for most sites rarely drops below 100 per cent, access can be seen as not only fast but also consistently available. This, combined with the reviews from Google (see below), gives a strong indication that the quality is high.

3. Google Reviews Analysis

An examination of Google reviews of the library shows quite favourable responses when free Wi-Fi is mentioned, although a degree of caution is advised when looking at this type of data. This is primarily because it is not systematically collected, can contain bias, and may in some cases be out-of-date as it is rarely, if ever, deleted. The value, however lies in giving a snapshot, or rough indicator of how users are thinking about services.

Location	Reviews	Average score	Mention Wi-Fi	Positive	Negative
Library at the Dock	410	4.7	4	4	0
Boyd Library	54	4.6	6	6	0
City Library	266	4.5	17	14	3
Kathleen Syme	73	4.6	4	4	0
North Melbourne	48	4.7	2	1	1
East Melbourne	31	4.7	4	4	0
Total	882	4.6	37	33	4

Table 1: CoM Libraries Google Reviews Data

In the case of CoM libraries, the snapshot from Google reviews shows that the library overall is valued (rating average 4.6), and that the Wi-Fi when mentioned is mostly positive (88 per cent). Those who commented note the speed as a feature as its considered fast and one person comments on being able to use the Wi-Fi outside the library.

The negative comments refer to slowness, however most of these were over three years old, and to counter these there were comments from the same time complimenting the speed from the same period.

Sample of Comments from Google Reviews	Location
The Wi-Fi is very stable, I was there for hours and did not lose the connection at all, in fact it is the best Wi-Fi spot I have ever found in Melbourne so far.	Library at the Dock
There is no Wi-Fi limit and you can use it very comfortably!	
It is super-fast Wi-Fi	
Cozy library with free Wi-Fi with good bandwidth, nice sitting areas, charging stations and power points and coffee shop.	Boyd Library
Beautiful library, cozy and with excellent Wi-Fi connection.	
Free, fast internet. Helpful library personnel	
It's a small library, many interesting books, really good fast internet for researching and working on words docs!	East Melbourne Library
We rely on public Wi-Fi and this one is disappointingly slow to the extent of unusable, so don't come for that!	North Melbourne Library
They offer free Wi-Fi here - easy to log on and works great.	City Library
Free Wi-Fi 24/7 - great for skyping back in the UK outside on the picnic benches :)	Kathleen Syme Library

Table 2: CoM Libraries Google Reviews Sample of Comments

4. Other Community Facilities

The quality of Wi-Fi in other community facilities was more difficult to ascertain as data is not captured at the same level as the libraries, and not all community facilities use the same Internet Service Provider (ISP).

Some providers such as YMCA are in the process of reviewing Wi-Fi providers. This is partly as they have more than one ISP and are looking to consolidate. Whilst the YMCA are open to providing Wi-Fi at the same level as libraries, they are unlikely to extend the footprint beyond visitor or member lounges and communal spaces due to restrictions for child safety and privacy reasons.

“We regulate our conditions of entry to ban phone use in certain areas and times when using the facility. We wouldn't want to promote and/or extend the Wi-Fi access and usage outside of the 'member lounge' areas/communal spaces.”

YMCA Manager

The table below outlines current Wi-Fi set-up in the recreation centres, and the key demographics of those centres.

Facility	Wi-Fi Provider	Centre Demographic
Carlton Baths (YMCA)	CoM – Easyweb	Youth, Families, Students (Maternal Health Connected to the facility)
Melbourne City Baths (CoM)	CoM – Easyweb	Prime (65+), Swim School Families, Students, City Office Workers
North Melbourne Community Centre (YMCA)	CoM – Easyweb	Youth, CALD communities, Students, Very diverse demographic (Maternal Health Connected to the Facility)
North Melbourne Recreation Centre (YMCA)	CoM – Easyweb	Regular gym users, youth, stadium sport users.
North Melbourne Pool (YMCA)	CoM – Easyweb	Lap swimmers, school groups, families, international student, students
Kensington Town Hall (YMCA)	YMCA Provider	Community Groups, Non-Government Organisations (NGO)
Hubs @ Docklands (YMCA)	YMCA Provider	Youth, Community Groups

Table 3: CoM Recreation facilities Wi-Fi and primary user cohort

Community facilities that had for the most part a learning and inclusion focus, such as the Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre saw the value in consistent approach across the city to free Wi-Fi. Some saw the opportunity to promote this, including the development of a Free Wi-Fi symbol to assist in making the access more widely known.

As well, some raised the need to ensure adequate charging facilities were available for people to charge devices. Community safety was also a concern especially with access to free Wi-Fi outside the buildings by ensuring adequate lighting and shelter was installed.

From the data and discussions with various stakeholders a number of improvements to the current Wi-Fi can be recommended.

- Improve Wi-Fi access by establishing a standard level of Wi-Fi for community facilities, reviewed annually so that this standard can also become the benchmark for other community agencies offering free Wi-Fi.
- Improve Wi-Fi access from library buildings by extending the footprint of the signal.

- Ensure the availability of free Wi-Fi is published and promoted widely, especially to those at risk of digital exclusion.
- Explore possibilities for permanent, or temporary free Wi-Fi for people in need in places where they gather such as food support centres.

To implement these, consideration needs to be given to the following:

- To extend the footprint of the Wi-Fi beyond the library buildings and encompass greater Wi-Fi area needs to ensure that safety and lighting concerns are included in design.
- Investigation of the provision of charging spaces outside the library buildings and potentially some of the other community facilities.
- Work with the other community facilities, ISPs and parts of council to establish a standard of delivery and set up a mechanism to measure impact of usage.
- Investigation of the possibility of creating a Visual Symbol for free Wi-Fi
- Publicise the free Wi-Fi offering across all facilities, especially to groups that may be digitally excluded and to those whose first language is not English.

5. Infrastructure – current and future needs

A number of stakeholders felt that agencies and parts of council that regularly interface with community closely could play a role in identifying people who needed a free computer or mobile device, thus supporting the city to grow a circular economy around Information Communication and Technology.¹

As such, CoM has an opportunity to explore how the device donation scheme similar to that at the Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre, could be further developed and expanded to include agencies such as Maternal and Child Health and Aged Services. These agencies often have access to people's homes or in the case of child care centres, insight into a family's needs. This would also work to support other council strategic directions such as recycling and environmental waste reduction.

Key considerations emerged from meetings and interviews with City of Melbourne Technical staff, Library technical staff and the Internet Service Provider (ISP), Easyweb Digital, that informed the review.

The underlying purpose of the work of the City of Melbourne's Technical staff is to enable residents and staff of the city through technology to engage and communicate effectively and efficiently as possible. Particularly those residents that were considered digitally excluded, and the outreach staff that were seen as their interface to council.

Ensuring that the technology roadmap for CoM includes adequate growth and support for free Wi-Fi is recommended. This includes budget provision for data growth, equipment replacement/upgrade, and the capacity to support testing and trialling of new solutions such as the Wi-Fi benches at the Flemington Housing Estate, or new models of service that may emerge from library outreach, for example, Mel-van.

¹ <https://unctad.org/topic/trade-and-environment/circular-economy>

6. Gap analysis – where is there community need for Wi-Fi in our facilities that is poor quality or is not provided.

There is a sizable amount of public housing both within the Melbourne LGA, and the surrounding LGA's, the need to ensure that residents have access, and the skills to use affordable technology is an important issue to solve. The Digital Inclusion challenge facing public housing residents is clearly a gap that needs to be tackled strategically. The challenges for public housing residents have been known and documented for some time.^{2 3 4}

The work by CADI and Australian Communication and Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) have identified clear gaps around those living in public housing across all three dimensions of digital inclusion. One of these is the level to which public housing residents rely on mobile phones for digital access and participation. The evidence is that for a range of reasons, mobile-only use results in considerably lower digital inclusion levels across all three dimensions of Digital Inclusion.⁵

Another gap that is linked to the issue of affordability identified through the work of CADI and the Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre, was the need to ensure people on low income had access to digital devices, in particular laptops. Working with University of Melbourne and through the Open-Door initiative a program of donating free computers to people in need was developed.

Another consideration some stakeholders raised as a potential gap was around the ability of those delivering training, especially in a 1:1 situation. Developing a plan for Digital Inclusion within CoM should take this into account by identifying the base level of skills and consistent set of learning tools required for digital tutors.

CoM could consider adopting a model similar to that of the New York Public Library with its Digital Inclusion Toolkit and the designated roles for digital navigators to ensure any gap around the teaching of technology is closed and that community facilities have up-to-date and consistent digital inclusion information.⁶ The toolkit could be both online and printed, updated regularly and if possible be developed with neighbouring LGAs recognising that people from public housing for example cross borders for all sorts of services.

7. User types of CoM free Wi-Fi

There is a clear need for CoM libraries and other community facilities to continue supporting Digital Inclusion initiatives into the future. We know from the survey administered via the library PCs at login point as part of this review, that over 40 per

² Dulfer, Nicky, et al, 2022.

³ Fitzgerald, Brendan, Tegan Kop, Julie Tucker, Daniel Salmon, Narelle Clark, Rachel Thomas, and T Karliychuk. "Social Housing and Broadband: Internet Use and Affordability for Social Housing Residents,." ACCAN, 2016. <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/research/1331-social-housing-and-broadband>.

⁴ Infoboxchange. "WiredCommunity@Collingwood: Final Evaluation Report," August 17, 2011. <https://apo.org.au/node/25968>.

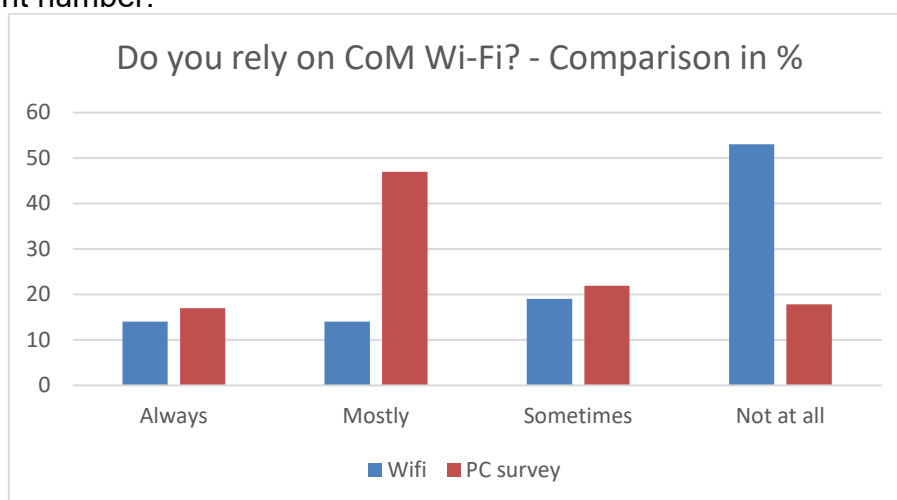
⁵ <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/case-study-mobile-only-australians/>

⁶ <https://www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/Digital-Inclusion-Toolkit.pdf>

cent of respondents indicated that they relied on the City of Melbourne Wi-Fi either, “All the Time”, or “Mostly (N=257).

With over 15 per cent viewing the library as being their sole place to use and rely on free Wi-Fi, more work should be considered to better understand who these people are and whether or not there is a need to develop further Digital Inclusion interventions and programs to support them. It is likely that this also shows up a need to have access to a connected device as well as the bandwidth.

The survey was repeated for people logging into the free Wi-Fi from their own devices and the data showed that there are still around 25 per cent relying on the CoM Wi-Fi either, “All the Time”, or “Mostly” (N= 5315). Given they have their own devices this is a significant number.



Graph 1- PC and Wi-Fi Login Survey Q 1. Do you rely on the City of Melbourne for access to the internet?

8. Why users access Wi-Fi at our facilities

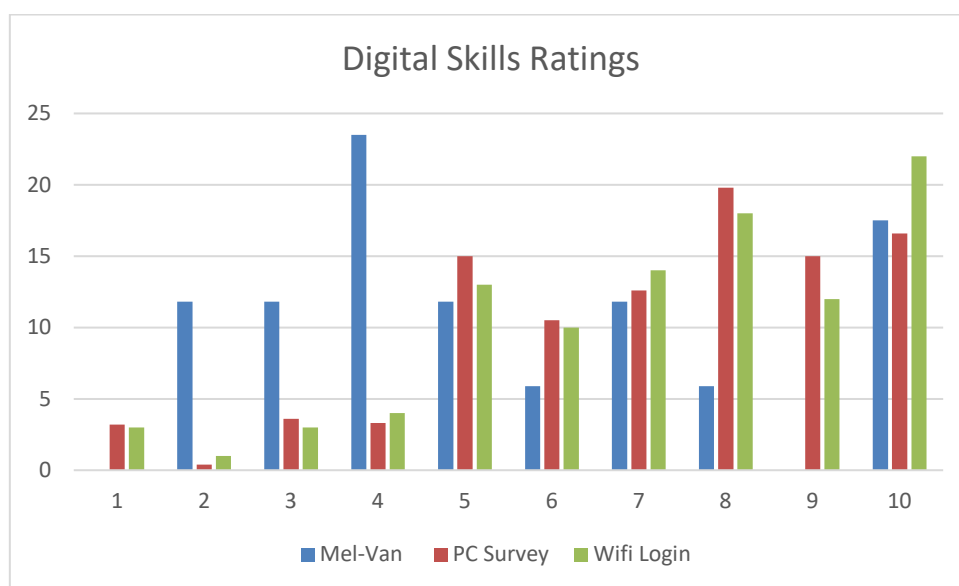
To gauge why people use CoM facilities, a two-question survey was run through all libraries over a seven-day period on the PC at login point as well as on the login of the free Wi-Fi. The same question was asked of users at two Mel-van sessions as well.

The aim was to understand how important the access to free Wi-Fi was for the users who responded (see above), as well as to identify how they rated themselves from a digital skills perspective. The first of those questions identified significant reliance on CoM free Wi-Fi and the in-house PCs indicate that access to a connected device was important.

The second of the two questions revealed that 25 per cent of those respondents to the PC user survey felt they had average or below average digital skills when rated from 1 to 10 (with 1 being beginner and 10 being expert).

For the free Wi-Fi login survey around 23 per cent felt their skills were average or below, and for the Mel-van the figure was just under 60 per cent. The high figure for Mel-van to some degree reinforces the need for 1:1 outreach and technical support, although it should be noted that the Mel Van numbers are small (N=17) in comparison

to the PC and Wi-Fi surveys, so it would be worth building that data to see if the figures change significantly.



Graph 2 - PC and Wi-Fi Login Survey and Mel-Van survey comparison. Q 2. Please rate your Digital Skills?

There are a range of reasons why people utilise the free Wi-Fi that CoM offers. These range from students doing research, through to tourists and visitors connecting with family and friends overseas.

The important factor is that there is strong evidence that the Wi-Fi is used by people in need, or people who have limited choices in relation to internet access. To help understand this better it is recommended that CoM develop a system of capturing and sharing data that measures impact from the activity focussed on improving Digital Inclusion. It is vital for Digital Inclusion planning to undertake regular research to better understand and advocate for those who:

- Don't use CoM community facilities, e.g., public housing residents, prison release, homeless and at risk etc.
- Do use CoM digital inclusion services (so as to track change and quality of service)

9. Barriers to people accessing Wi-Fi – quality/device issues etc

From the work of CADI in particular we know that the key barrier to access is devices. There are however other associated barriers such as people not knowing that Wi-Fi exists is available, where they can access it and what skills they have to take advantage of the Wi-Fi.

From the usage statistics of the Book a Librarian service we know that almost all requests for help to that service are technology based (97 per cent). There is an opportunity to develop outreach and Digital Navigator roles leveraging the Book a Librarian staff and triage model.

The survey response from Mel-van although it was a small dataset did show significant value in terms of impact in reducing barriers for individuals. All 17 attendees reported being more confident with technology after the sessions and many could articulate what they learnt specific to their need.

- *Generally more confident*
- *I could do more with my phone and computer*
- *I know how to practice typing*
- *Confident to search the internet*
- *I know how to use translate app and install a new app*
- *It is an ongoing process for me and there still seems to be areas I need help with. I have gained more knowledge generally as to how the*
- *Lauren showed me how to access the library's e books.*
- *Taking photos, listening to radio*
- *Using hatch program*

10. Partnerships / advocacy opportunities i.e., opportunities to improve CoM provision of access to the service.

The City of Melbourne has a significant opportunity to develop, nurture, and maintain positive and mutually beneficial relationships with community organisations, government bodies at all levels, and the corporate and business community. This is particularly the case when it comes to Digital Inclusion and ensuring all citizens can participate in the digital economy.

Work needs to be done to map these partnerships and to systematically engage so as to achieve the best outcomes. As such, CoM should investigate the establishment of a Digital Inclusion Network to bring partners together in a systematic way enabling information and resource sharing, new projects and improved Digital Inclusion, especially for those at risk. This will enable CoM to identify and build partnerships with organisations that have a Digital Inclusion focus aligned with CoM strategic direction.