

# VOLUNTEERING *and* CONTACT ACT

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## Volunteering and Contact ACT

### *Your Digital Territory*

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*Volunteering and Contact ACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra Region. Volunteering and Contact ACT pays respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and their vital ongoing contribution to the community.*

*Volunteering and Contact ACT acknowledges the contribution of the volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations that contribute to the health and happiness of the community. Volunteers include people of all genders and sexualities, with all abilities and from all cultures. Their skills, expertise, and time are critical to delivering services and programs, and in making Canberra a better place to live.*

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## Overview

Volunteering and Contact ACT (VCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the update of the ACT Government Digital Strategy. This submission focuses on the opportunity to make Canberra a more inclusive, progressive and connected city by better integrating digital Government services with those already provided by the community. Further, our submission highlights the critical role that digital services play in enabling Canberrans to participate, but recognises that not all Canberrans can or want to access services in a digital way.

VCA is the peak body for volunteering and community information in the Canberra Region. We have a vision for an inclusive Canberra. Through our services and programs, we foster volunteering, information, participation, community networks and undertake research, advocacy, projects, training and events. VCA is a people driven, service-focused organisation that represents the interests of 172 member organisations and engages with the broader Canberra community.

VCA provides training, support and advice for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations; provides community information services through our Community Information Hub, via phone and through our online ACT Community Directory and Diary; and runs two programs for people who are experiencing barriers to connecting with the community.

## ACT Government Digital Strategy

The vision embodied by the ACT Government's first Digital Strategy was, "to be a fearlessly digital city/state that has embraced revolutionary and innovative technology to grow and diversify our economy, connect our people, accelerate our learning, and nurture our culture and community." In seeking to update this strategy with a focus on connection, inclusion and 'one community, one city, one government', it is important that the ACT Government does not lose sight of the fact that it is not working alone.

Collaboration across the community is recognised in the current Digital Strategy, particularly under the principle that 'digital is for everyone'. However, there is more that could be done to integrate digital services already developed, recognised and in use in the community.

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It must also be recognised that there are members of the community who either prefer or need in person support. The revised Digital Strategy should consider how face-to-face, telephone and text services can enable participation and connection for all Canberrans, irrespective of how they choose to interact with the services they need.

This submission makes recommendations against the four pillars to be included in the new Digital Strategy.

## [An inclusive, progressive and connected city](#)

An inclusive, progressive and connected city is one characterised by a culture that promotes connection and participation at every level of the community. Given that the ACT is a relatively small jurisdiction geographically, there is an immense opportunity for digital initiatives to have a whole-of-jurisdiction approach.

The vision for an inclusive, progressive and connected Canberra should treat technology as an enabler of participation. Automating services and moving historically person-centred services online can be a great way to improve efficiencies and allow people to participate in a convenient way. At the heart of such automation should be user-centred design, which considers the needs of all persons within the community, especially those experiencing disadvantage.

VCA recommends that any measures to increase inclusion through digital services is done in consultation with marginalised and socially excluded groups. This would ensure that the drive to embrace digital technologies in the Region does not lead to the exclusion of those unable or unwilling to access digital services. It is a critical to ensure that digital innovation meets the unique needs of these groups, and that digital services are tailored and appropriate for a range of audiences.

VCA receives funding from the Community Services Directorate to provide community information, which accounts for the provision of a physical presence in the Griffin Centre. This Community Information Hub is still well frequented, and the availability of computers and a public phone enable access for those who do not have these luxuries in their homes, or for those experiencing homelessness.

Canberra cannot become a more inclusive, progressive and connected community if the efforts to promote digital connections and information inadvertently exclude vulnerable members of the community. While a focus on digital technologies and services may bring efficiencies, it is vital that in updating the Digital Strategy and across Government, adequate priority and

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resourcing is given to providing face-to-face services to support all Canberrans, such as those provided in VCA's Community Information Hub.

One community, one city, one government – with “great services that make it easier for me”

The updated Digital Strategy should strengthen the principle of integrating Government digital services with those already provided by Government funded community organisations. VCA provides a number of digital services to the community, to connect Canberrans to each other and to the groups or services they need. Whilst the current Digital Strategy references contributions from VCA as embodying the principle of collaboration and data sharing, the principle falls short of what is possible with current digital tools.

VCA's ACT Community Directory lists over 1700 organisations offering over 3000 services and programs in the Canberra Region. The Directory is searchable by location, service category and keywords. The content in the Directory is instantly translatable to over 100 different languages. A related smartphone app can also be used to find services nearby and to view pre-populated favourites lists. The ACT Community Diary, a sister platform of the Directory, allows organisations to list and promote their community events.

Key features of VCA's ACT Community Directory are that organisations can obtain a login enabling them to list and update their details at any stage. They are empowered to manage their own data and information through free training and technical support. On average, the Directory is viewed by over 10,000 different users each month, with over 20,000 separate listings viewed.

The ACT Government also hosts an ACT Community Group Directory, under Multicultural Services. While there has previously been some data sharing, the two directories are currently supported by different datasets and are maintained independently of each other. Unfortunately, this is not a unique example with other Directorates looking to develop their own Directories independently. Not only does this result in a wasteful duplication of funding and resources, it erodes the 'one source of truth' about community services and programs in the ACT that VCA is funded to provide. This is a perfect example of how the principle of collaboration, as outlined in the Digital Strategy, has not been fully realised in practice.

There are digital tools that would allow VCA's Directory and Diary to be easily leveraged by the ACT Government to provide a central, single source of truth about community-based organisations and services. Widgets can be configured in various ways and embedded in websites to access and present information based on a single, up to date dataset.

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There is also an opportunity to collaborate further with Government to ensure that between VCA's Directory and Diary, and the digital services provided by Access Canberra, there are no gaps in the information provided to the community.

Civic leadership and deliberative democracy – “I am involved and can contribute to how this city evolves”

Creating an inclusive city requires the consideration of multiple factors, including spatial, social and economic factors. Work done globally to create more inclusive communities has had to balance the potential of urbanisation with the inadvertent consequences of further entrenching inequality, exclusion and poverty. Technology and digital services need to wrap-around person-centred approaches to inclusivity that prioritise participation for all people.

Goal 11 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is to, “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.” Key to achieving this goal is deliberative democracy and opportunities for people to shape their communities. At present, much of the consultation on changes and new initiatives in Canberra take place online. Whilst this expands the opportunity for people to participate, it also preferences participation from those who are fortunate enough to have access to such forums.

Hidden disadvantage is rife in Canberra and is masked by employment in the local and federal public services which suggest a higher standard of living than is reality for many Canberrans. In order to have a truly inclusive community, the ACT Government must ensure that people feel empowered to have a say on the issues that matter to them and affect them. Key to achieving this is partnering with community organisations that are at the coalface of delivering services, especially to those experiencing disadvantage. In many cases, relationships built on trust between community organisations and their clients can be a powerful mechanism to obtaining the viewpoints of people who may be unlikely to otherwise participate in government consultations. In this respect, technology and digital services can be an enabler of participation, but face-to-face consultation is imperative to obtain diverse viewpoints from the community.

If the people of Canberra feel a sense of ownership over the decisions that affect them, they are more likely to participate, which is a long-term success factor for inclusion.

Optimised and efficient government – using the resources we have to get the most benefit

As mentioned above, key to optimisation and efficiency is better leveraging the multitude of digital platforms and systems already in place in Government and across the community. A key example of the way such collaboration and alignment could work is the Better Services

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Information Portal delivered by the ACT Government. In 2016 the ACT Government partnered with VCA to deliver the My Canberra portal. My Canberra (the 'sister' product of the My Family portal), is an intuitive information portal which assists people to find services and information relevant and tailored to their needs. The user does not need to understand the complex service system, rather, they answer a number of simple questions about their situation and they are provided with a range of service options appropriate for them. The Portal leverages off and links to services already listed within the ACT Community Directory (again reducing unnecessary duplication in online directories).

VCA developed the question pathways (and identified the appropriate outcomes for individuals) in consultation with the Better Services team and could deliver similar portals relevant to different target groups for other parts of government. The outcome of the portal is that not only are people assisted to navigate services and community information in a meaningful way, they are also empowered to make informed decisions about their lives.

VCA has also established a partnership with Access Canberra to increase efficiencies and ensure people are able to access the right information at the right time. It is common for Canberrans to contact Access Canberra requesting information about services and programs within the community (which VCA is funded and has the expertise to provide). Conversely, VCA receives large number of enquiries which fall within Access Canberra's remit. Currently, Access Canberra have the ACT Community Directory as part of their larger database of information and both parties facilitate warm referrals to one another over the phone where appropriate. However, there are many simple digital solutions that would enhance the users experience including a direct phone line from our office to Access Canberra, allowing our team to transfer calls made to us in error (and vice versa) so that people are not forced to retell their story, and including a widget to the ACT Community Directory and Diary on the Access Canberra website.

This is just one example of how an updated Digital Strategy, with a focus on collaboration and inclusion, could better serve the needs of Canberrans through efficiency gains obtained through linking already existing digital services.

## Conclusion

The ACT Government's current Digital Strategy is visionary and has the potential to create positive change in making Canberra a more accessible, inclusive and progressive city. Key to achieving this vision will be active collaboration with community services, who have a unique and nuanced understanding of the needs of many Canberrans, but particularly vulnerable people and people experiencing disadvantage.

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Volunteering and Contact ACT shares the ACT Government's vision for an inclusive Canberra and would be interested in further collaborating with the ACT Government on the revised Digital Strategy to ensure it meets the needs of community information consumers and encourages equitable participation accessible to all Canberrans.

*Working together to support volunteering and community connection in the ACT  
VCA would like to acknowledge that it receives considerable support, including funding, from the ACT Government. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with the Government, our members, and other partners, to advance volunteering and community information in the Canberra Region.*