

# **‘The Value of Living Connected’: An Investigative Report**



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## **1. Overview of project**

### **1.1. Rationale**

As individuals, having worthwhile relationships, as well as feeling socially connected to family and the wider community, can improve health and wellbeing and decrease mortality rates (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2017). Older people are more susceptible to experiencing social isolation due to many factors including impaired mental and/or physical capabilities or the loss of a loved one (AIHW 2017). According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2017), 1 in 5 older Australians are reported to experience social isolation. Furthermore, in an increasingly digitalised world, older people are becoming increasingly excluded from the community due to becoming disconnected from loved ones, an inability to engage in as many activities and access crucial government services, perpetuating social isolation (Hasan & Linger 2018)

Prior research has demonstrated that ICT technology can expand and sustain social relationships amongst older people, enhancing social and emotional wellbeing. Research surrounding older populations has mostly focused on medical and economic concerns (Khosravi et al. 2016; Hasan & Linger 2018). There has been substantial research done to identify the social and emotional needs of older people, including how ICT addresses these concerns. Prior research has found that ICT classes held in residential aged care facilities enhance the social participation and involvement of elderly residents, contributing to their occupation and giving them a sense of control and dignity over their lives once their digital capabilities develop (Hasan & Linger 2016).

Existing computer-for-seniors programs have only scratched the surface of these needs. Previous research into the social and emotional wellbeing of seniors related to their use of digital technology is limited.

### **1.2. Research Question**

Due to the circumstances described in the previous section, the researcher formulated the following research question:

“How does a community-based ICT intervention utilising a person-centred approach influence the social and emotional wellbeing of older Australians residing in the Illawarra region?”

### **1.3. Research Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this research report was to determine how a community-based ICT intervention utilising a person-centred approach influences the social and emotional wellbeing of older Australians residing in the Illawarra region.

The overarching research question was answered by fulfilling the following objectives:

- (1) To determine the factors that contribute to the social and emotional wellbeing of older Australians.
- (2) To assess the difficulties older Australians face in regards to accessing and utilising digital technologies.
- (3) To explore the reasons why older Australians seek assistance in learning how to use their digital devices.
- (4) To determine how a community-based, person-centred ICT intervention contributes to the social and emotional wellbeing of older Australians.

### **1.4. Methodology**

For the purpose of this research project, the researcher implemented a constructivist methodology as the researcher was concerned with the individual’s knowledge and experiences guiding the research project (Ultanir 2012). The researcher undertook qualitative research methods as they were interested in examining people’s “beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviours and interactions” (Pathak et al. 2013, p. 192).

#### **1.4.1. Research Setting**

Research was undertaken at two user driven computer help centres run by Living Connected at Unanderra Community Centre and iAccelerate. The centres are run mostly through the provision of volunteers, however; there are a small number of paid staff. These centres allowed older clients to drop-in on a weekly/fortnightly basis and get technological assistance on any aspect of their technology that they are interested in learning or becoming more familiar with.

### 1.4.2. Participants

Six participants were recruited as part of this study. The characteristics of these participants are outlined in figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 below.

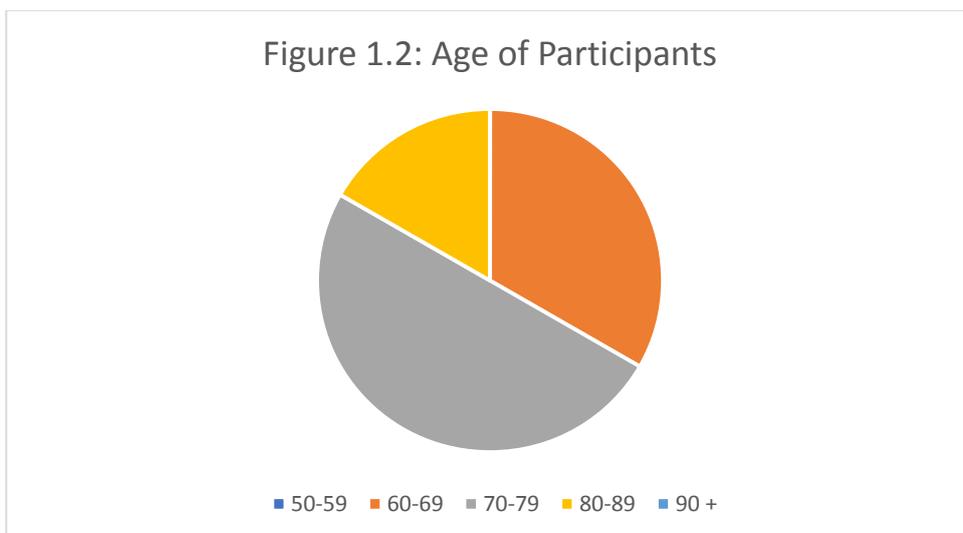
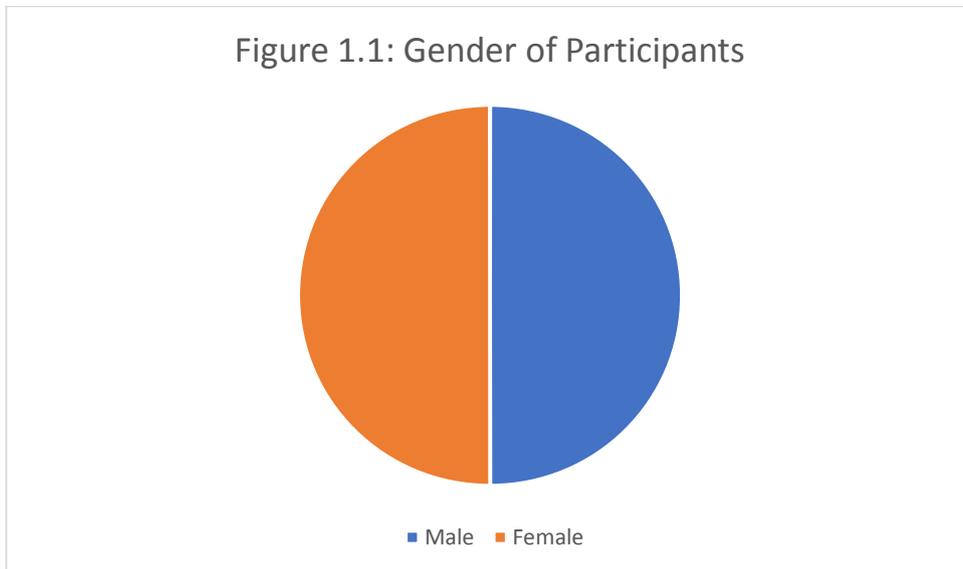


Figure 1.3: Residential Postcode of Participants

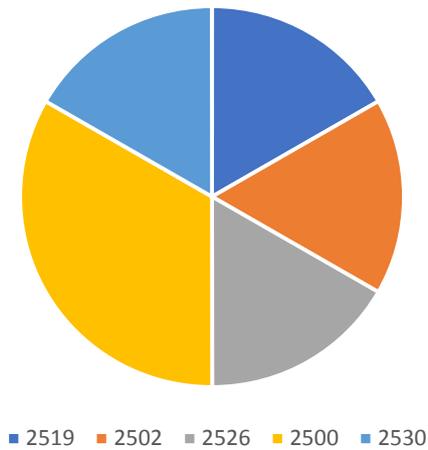
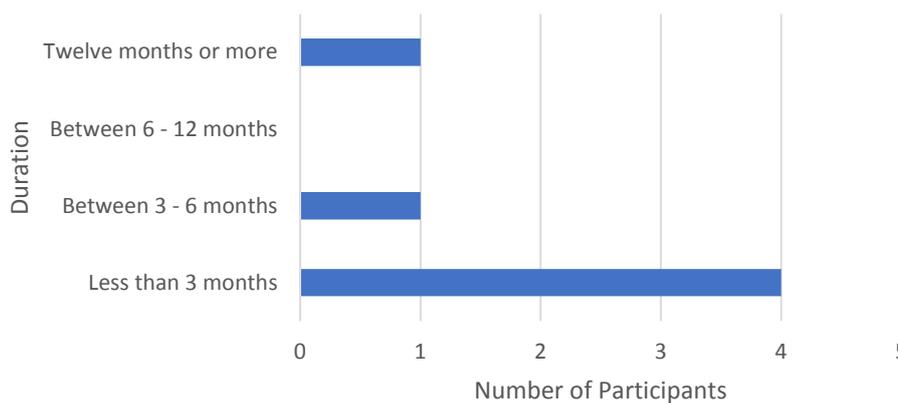


Figure 1.4: Duration of time attending Living Connected



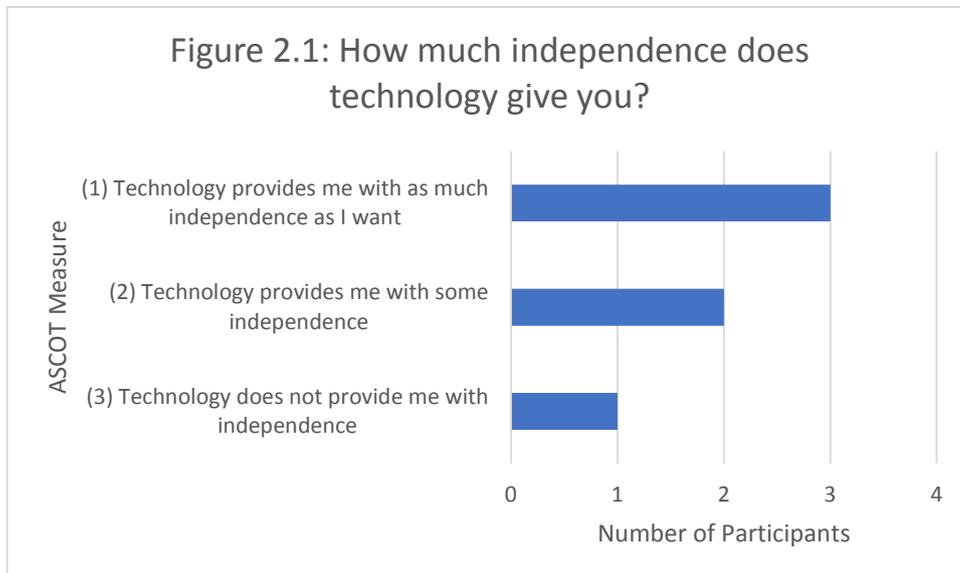
### 1.4.3. Method

As a preliminary research phase of this project, the researcher undertook some voluntary work at Living Connected to understand firsthand how the organisation operated. The method undertaken for data collection included conducting semi-structured interviews that consisted of ASCOT measures, checklist and open-response questions (see appendixes 1, 2). Once saturation was reached the researcher amended the open questions through means of snowballing to gather more data on topics not originally considered (see appendix 3). Notes from the interviews were taken by hand whilst the interviews were simultaneously audio recorded for transcription. Audio from the interviews were transcribed manually and thematic analysis was undertaken.

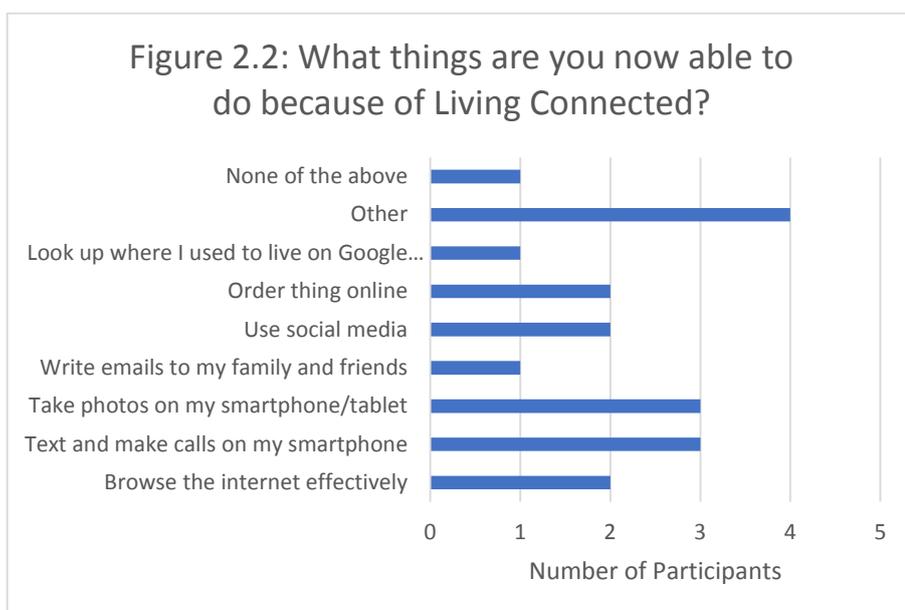
## 2. Results

### 2.1. Theme 1: Independence

Using an ASCOT measure, participants were asked how much independence technology gives them and the results are shown in Figure 2.1.



As shown in Figure 2.2, participants have learnt how to use an array of technology independently since commencing Living Connected. The participants interviewed were quite diverse in their technological abilities – some participants were grasping the basics, whereas; others were quite independent already, but required support to learn “hidden functions”.



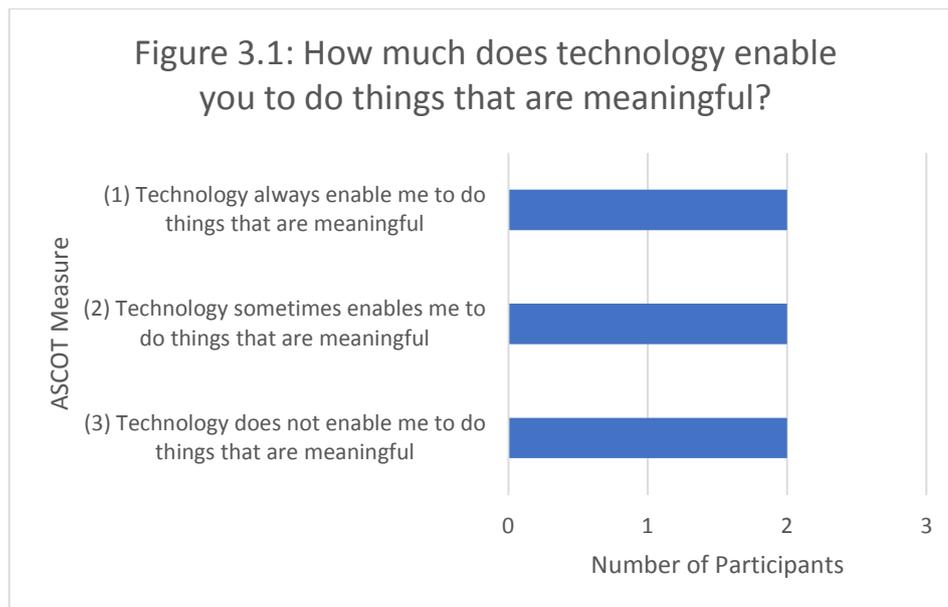
Five out of six participants believed that Living Connected has given them confidence to try new things, with the service allowing older people to learn things

that they otherwise would not be able to do. Notably, participants mentioned “you feel so much more secure and confident if you have someone there who can take you through [things]” and “I know I won’t be able to discover these things unless I turn up to a centre like this”.

As per figure 2.1, one participant believed that technology did not provide him with independence. He disclosed this was because his partner passed away recently and “he used to do everything”. Another participant noted that they “prefer to do things the ‘old fashioned way’”. Saying this, the participants came to a consensus that they still see the value in technology as if they do not learn how to use it, they will get left behind and it’ll get increasingly harder to do things.

## 2.2. Theme 2: Meaningful things to do

Using an ASCOT measure, participants were asked how much technology enables them to do things that are meaningful and the results are shown in figure 3.1.

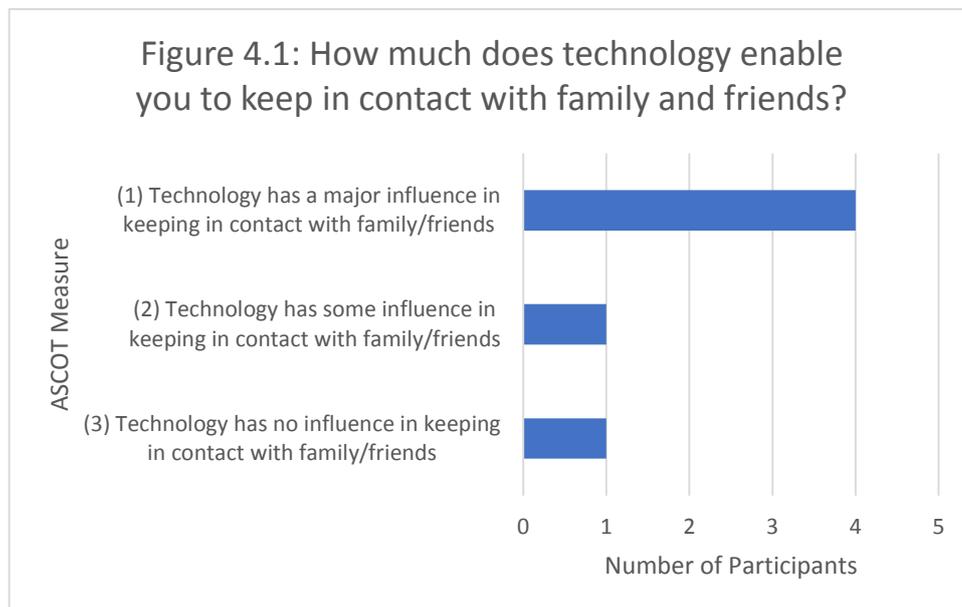


Results for this question were spread equally across the six participants. Some participants believe technology is a big contributor to their daily lives, for others it provides little to no influence. Five out of the six participants agreed that it is very time saving – information can be gained instantaneously, making it easier to organise outings with friends/family. Two out of the six participants mentioned it made their time a lot more efficient with one participant saying that researching on the internet is “fairly quick... [not having to go to the library] and spend hours down there looking at books” whilst another participant thought of it more as a “tool” than “to

keep yourself occupied”. Two out of the six participants believe it has no influence on their lives, either because they do not know how to use technology or they would prefer to “occupy their time in other ways”. One participant notably mentioned that it is “important to keep face-to-face contact with people or you become isolated”, however; it is a great tool in staying connected.

### 2.3. Theme 3: Connection with family/friends

Using an ASCOT measure, participants were asked how much technology enables them to keep in contact with family and friends and the results are shown in figure 4.1.



Four out of the six participants believed technology had a major influence in keeping in contact with family/friends. Without technology, all participants agreed that it would be exceptionally hard to keep in contact with family friends. Notably, one participant mentioned that “I’d never be able to contact their daughter without skype or the phone”, whilst another participant stressed that they would be “lost without it... technology enables me to function, to do interesting things and contact my friends”. Participants who indicated that technology had some/no influence in keeping in contact with family and friends stated that they preferred face-to-face contact or did not know how to use technology.

### 2.4. Theme 4: General satisfaction with Living Connected

Participants were generally satisfied with the Living Connected service. All participants praised the 1:1 nature of the service, stating that they felt comfortable,

more confident and felt as if they were being listened to: “it’s so much better here... I was doing another computer thing but I was learning nothing”. Four out of the six participants felt like traditional services (i.e. classes at the library) could pose as a deterrent to learning as it is harder to get assistance in larger groups. Another advantage of Living Connected is that it is immediate – “I have a problem today, I can come here and you can help me”. One participant did not notice much difference between Living Connected and other services – it was all dependent on their schedule and what they wanted to learn. All participants spoken to at Living Connected encouraged it to keep going and highlighted how a lot of people do not know about the service or are hesitant to seek assistance. Suggestions for improvement include having more opportunities for advancement, the provision of more staff/volunteers as sometimes it is difficult to get more “intensive support” and to outreach Living Connected to the university to assist mature-aged students.

### **3. Discussion**

#### **3.1. Statement of Key Findings**

A community-based ICT intervention utilising a person-centred approach largely influences the social and emotional wellbeing of older Australians residing in the Illawarra Region. Utilising Living Connected as a case study, it was found that an intervention such as this supports an individual’s independence and ability to connect with friends and family, giving older people meaningful things to do with their time through the aid of digital technology.

As presented in the results described in section 2.1, it can be seen that technology gives people a large amount of independence. Services such as Living Connected enable older people to learn and become confident in array of digital technology. Without the support of Living Connected, many older people would feel left behind and excluded, perpetuating social isolation. As outlined in results sections 2.1 and 2.4, the approach of Living Connected is unique in that it provides 1:1 assistance, putting the individual’s needs and wants at the forefront. Older people feel they are being listened to and feel like they have a sense of control, as opposed to other traditional services, for example, classes at a library or assistance in store as these can be very overwhelming and a deterrent to learning.

Further interpretation of the results in section 2.1, revealed how utilising technology can help an older person maintain their independence. Without this, many older people would feel left behind. Many things older people are used to doing are transitioning online and as their physical/cognitive capacities diminish, they are unable to do such things they were previously able to do on their own.

As described in the results presented in section 2.2, Living Connected has given older people the confidence to utilise technology as part of their day to day lives. Results collated in section 2.2 can infer that digital technology acts as a tool to make things more efficient to do and enables older people to function to their full capacity. Through interpretation of the results of section 2.2, those who do not have a strong affiliation with technology still see the importance and need to do things without technology, however; it is always there to fall back on if needed.

As described in the results presented in section 2.3, Living Connected has enabled community members to keep in contact with family/friends through Skype, email and other means. As shown in the results of section 2.3, without the use of technology, older people would feel disconnected from their family, especially if they were living overseas. The support from Living Connected has enabled older people to become confident in navigating the internet, texting and email which are all highly influential in keeping in contact with family and friends.

From the research, it can be inferred that Living Connected is very beneficial in supporting an older person's emotional and social wellbeing. As shown in the results presented in section 2.4, community members that access Living Connected feel as if the service is inclusive, making them feel comfortable to ask questions, supporting their learning. It can be inferred that other 'traditional' services can sometimes be a deterrent to learning. As described in the results in section 2.4, group classes at the library for example do not have that 1:1 nature to them and participants are often limited to what the teacher wants them to learn.

### **3.2. Comparison with Previous Literature**

Previous literature into this topic undertaken in the local area has been restricted to an aged care setting, stating that ICT classes held in a residential setting enhances the social participation and improvement of elderly residents, contributing to their

occupation and giving them a sense of control and dignity over their lives once they become confident with technology (Hasan and Linger 2016). This hypothesis can be extended to a community setting because, as people are coming to these community user driven help sessions run by Living Connected, they are becoming increasingly independent, utilising technology in their day to day lives to support their emotional and social wellbeing.

Previous literature has also indicated that as the world is becoming increasingly digitalised, older people are becoming disconnected from their loved ones, finding it harder to engage in as many activities and access crucial government services, leading to social isolation (Hasan & Linger 2018). This has become evident through this research as participants noted that many integral, everyday services such as; banking and shopping are experiencing a 'digital shift'. From the results gathered, it can be inferred that without technology, older people would be excluded from the community as they would no longer be able to keep in contact with loved ones, socialise or complete meaningful everyday activities.

Another aspect of social exclusion found through this research aligned with findings from Hasan & Linger's (2018) research into reliance on a partner and feeling socially isolated once their partner has passed due to not having the capabilities to utilise technology. New themes that emerged through this research was technology's capacity to enable people to maintain their independence, hence staying at home for longer. Numerous participants noted that if they do not learn how to use technology now, once they become older and immobile, they will no longer be able to do things like banking, shopping or ordering meals through Meals on Wheels for example. This may force them into supported care early, which can be detrimental to an older persons' social and emotional wellbeing.

### **3.3. Strengths and Limitations**

This study has addressed numerous gaps in the literature. Previous research studies investigating the effectiveness of ICT interventions have only occurred in an aged care setting, which excludes a significant proportion of the population in the community who are still living independently at home. This research has demonstrated a holistic understanding of how technology contributes to older people's emotional and social wellbeing and the value of Living Connected in

supporting older people's wellbeing by enabling them to confidently and independently utilise digital technology. Furthermore, this research will guide the future practice of Living Connected to ensure the service is meeting the needs and wants of consumers accessing the drop-in sessions.

One major limitation of this study is the scope. Due to the short time of which this study was undertaken, the researcher was only limited to six participants from Living Connected centres at Unanderra and iAccelerate. This makes it difficult to generalise the results amongst all users of Living Connected across the Illawarra region. The researcher found it hard to draw responses from those individuals who are opposed to utilising technology. In future, research into why people are opposed to utilising technology would be beneficial as it would allow academics, policy makers and community members to gain an understanding of how to support these individuals in an increasingly digitalised world. The majority of participants interviewed had been attending the Living Connected drop-in service for less than six months, making it difficult to assess the longer term affects of Living Connected on an older person's wellbeing.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Staying connected with family, friends and wider community is positively associated with better health outcomes. Older people are prone to experiencing social isolation due to numerous factors including a decline in their physical/mental capacities or the loss of a loved one. The current digital climate excludes older people due to structural and systematic changes. Older people are becoming increasingly excluded from their loved ones, are unable to complete as many meaningful activities and access crucial government services. Person-centred ICT interventions have been shown to be effective in enhancing the social and emotional wellbeing of older people residing in aged care, however; there is a lack of research demonstrating the effectiveness of such intervention(s) in a community setting.

This research has shown that a person centred, community-based ICT intervention is effective in enhancing the social and emotional wellbeing of older Australians residing in the Illawarra. Through the research, it was found that older people utilise technology for a variety of reasons including leisure, occupation and keeping in contact with loved ones. Barriers for the uptake of technology included reliance on family members that have

passed and not being familiar with and/or reluctant of technology. Older people's attitudes to technology highly differ, however; all participants agreed that learning how to utilise digital technology is beneficial because without it, they will be left behind. Living Connected has demonstrated to be highly effective as it provides a supportive, inclusive environment where many older people have been able develop confidence and independence in trying new things and navigating the digital realm independently.

With the support of Living Connected, older people can integrate technology into their daily lives, giving them a sense of control, enabling them to do things that are meaningful and staying connected with loved ones. All these factors contribute to optimal social and emotional wellbeing. It is shown that the 1:1 nature of Living Connected is more personable than other 'traditional' approaches which can be a deterrent to learning.

This service currently reflects gaps in current policy development and implementation as the social and emotional aspects of wellbeing are not well addressed. This research has demonstrated the importance of technology in supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of older people. Numerous policies have been implemented to address the medical and financial concerns facing older Australians, however; there are a lack of policies and interventions to address the inaccessibility of technology for older Australians. Nationwide policies and regulations are required to allow technology to be more inclusive of older peoples' needs, wants and capabilities to support their emotional and social wellbeing. This could be done through funding the provision of services, such as Living Connected, on a national scale to support the social and emotional wellbeing of older people across Australia and to ensure older Australians are no longer excluded in an increasingly digitalised world.

## **5. Highlights**

- Older people utilise technology for a range of reasons – to support their occupation, for leisure and/or connecting with others.
- Technology enables older people to maintain their independence, give meaning to their everyday activities and stay connected to loved ones.

- A personalised service such as Living Connected is effective in supporting the emotional and social wellbeing of older people as it is inclusive and supportive of their needs.
- Alternate services such as group-specific classes at the library and paying someone for assistance can pose a deterrent in an older person's learning.
- Even those that do not have a strong affiliation with technology see the value in it supporting an older person's wellbeing.

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## **7. Appendixes**

### **7.1. Appendix 1 – ASCOT Measures**

Referring to the scale below, please specify how much independence technology gives you

- (1) Technology provides me with as much independence as I want
- (2) Technology provides me with some independence
- (3) Technology does not provide me with independence

Referring to the scale below, please specify how much technology enables you to do things that are meaningful

- (1) Technology always enables me to do things that are meaningful
- (2) Technology sometimes enables me to do things that are meaningful
- (3) Technology does not enable me to do things that are meaningful

Referring to the scale below, please specify how much technology enables you to keep in contact with family and friends

- (1) Technology has a major influence in keeping in contact with friends/family
- (2) Technology has some influence in keeping in contact with friends/family
- (3) Technology has no influence in keeping in contact with friends/family

## 7.2. Appendix 2 – Interview Guide: First Version

1. Please specify your gender
  - Male
  - Female
2. Please specify the age bracket you fall into
  - 50 – 59
  - 60 – 69
  - 70 – 79
  - 80 – 89
  - 90 +
3. What is your postcode? \_\_\_\_\_
4. That things do you use technology for on a day to day to day basis. Please refer to the list below and expand if necessary
  - Looking up information e.g. phone numbers, news articles, holidays
  - Keeping in contact with friends and family via skype/social media/email/letters
  - Playing games e.g. sudoku, solitaire, Candy Crush
  - Researching family history
  - Taking photos and videos on my mobile device
  - Online shopping and/or banking
  - Borrowing eBooks or listening to audiobooks
  - Other (please specify)

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5. How long have you been attending Living Connected drop in sessions?
  - Less than three months
  - Between three and six months
  - Between six and twelve months
  - Twelve months or more

6. Referring to the scale below, please specify how much independence technology gives you
- (1) Technology provides me with as much independence as I want
  - (2) Technology provides me with some independence
  - (3) Technology does not provide me with independence
7. How has the support of Living Connected specifically helped you maintain your independence?
8. What are some of the things you were not able to do before coming to these drop-in sessions? Refer to the list below and expand if necessary
- Browse the internet effectively
  - Text and make calls on my smart phone
  - Take photos on my smart phone/tablet
  - Write emails to my family and friends
  - Use social media (e.g. Facebook, Messenger)
  - Order things online
  - Look up where I used to live on google maps
  - Other (please specify)
- 
- 
- 

9. Referring to the scale below, please specify how much technology enables you to do things that are meaningful
- (1) Technology always enables me to do things that are meaningful
  - (2) Technology sometimes enables me to do things that are meaningful
  - (3) Technology does not enable me to do things that are meaningful
10. How has the use of technology enhanced your day to day activities?
11. What are some of the things you do on your digital technology to keep yourself occupied? e.g. TV, music, games

12. Referring to the scale below, please specify how much technology enables you to keep in contact with family and friends
- (1) Technology has a major influence in keeping in contact with friends/family
  - (2) Technology has some influence in keeping in contact with friends/family
  - (3) Technology has no influence in keeping in contact with friends/family
13. How has technology enabled you to keep in contact with your loved ones? Please explain your answer
14. How difficult would it be to keep in contact with friends and family without the use of digital technology? Please explain your answer
15. Do you learn more here than at a class? Please explain your answer
16. Can you describe when you would go to a class as opposed to more personalised help and vice versa?
17. Do you have any suggestions on how Living Connected can be improved?

### 7.3. Appendix 3 – Interview Guide: Second Version

18. Please specify your gender

- Male
- Female

19. Please specify the age bracket you fall into

- 50 – 59
- 60 – 69
- 70 – 79
- 80 – 89
- 90 +

20. What is your postcode? \_\_\_\_\_

21. What things do you use technology for on a day to day to day basis? Please refer to the list below and expand if necessary

- Looking up information e.g. phone numbers, news articles, holidays
- Keeping in contact with friends and family via skype/social media/email/letters
- Playing games e.g. sudoku, solitaire, Candy Crush
- Researching family history
- Taking photos and videos on my mobile device
- Online shopping and/or banking
- Borrowing eBooks or listening to audiobooks
- Other (please specify)

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22. How long have you been attending Living Connected drop in sessions?

- Less than three months
- Between three and six months
- Between six and twelve months
- Twelve months or more

23. Referring to the scale below, please specify how much independence technology gives you

- (1) Technology provides me with as much independence as I want
- (2) Technology provides me with some independence
- (3) Technology does not provide me with independence

24. How would you have to depend on others if you did not know how to use technology?

25. Can you describe an incident where you have had trouble learning how to use your device and how did this made you feel?

26. What are some of the things you were not able to do before coming to these drop-in sessions? Refer to the list below and expand if necessary

- Browse the internet effectively
- Text and make calls on my smart phone
- Take photos on my smart phone/tablet
- Write emails to my family and friends
- Use social media (e.g. Facebook, Messenger)
- Order things online
- Look up where I used to live on google maps
- Other (please specify)

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27. Referring to the scale below, please specify how much technology enables you to do things that are meaningful

- (1) Technology always enables me to do things that are meaningful
- (2) Technology sometimes enables me to do things that are meaningful
- (3) Technology does not enable me to do things that are meaningful

28. How has the use of technology enhanced your day to day activities?

29. How would it change the way you spend your time if you could not use technology?

30. Referring to the scale below, please specify how much technology enables you to keep in contact with family and friends
- (1) Technology has a major influence in keeping in contact with friends/family
  - (2) Technology has some influence in keeping in contact with friends/family
  - (3) Technology has no influence in keeping in contact with friends/family
31. How has technology enabled you to keep in contact with your loved ones? Please explain your answer
32. How difficult would it be to keep in contact with friends and family without the use of digital technology? Please explain your answer
33. Do you learn more here than at a class? Please explain your answer
34. Can you describe when you would go to a class as opposed to more personalised help and vice versa?
35. Do you have any suggestions on how Living Connected can be improved?