



**Not-for-profit Sector
Development Blueprint**

**Submission &
Recommendations**

Good Things Foundation Australia
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Good Things
Foundation **Australia**

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Executive summary

Good Things Foundation is Australia's leading digital inclusion not-for-profit (NFP), which partners with thousands of community organisations across Australia, to improve the digital capability and confidence of those most at risk of digital exclusion. This includes the NFP workforce, volunteers and the people they support. Given this, the primary focus of this submission is on digital inclusion and securing the long term digital resilience of the sector.

With 1 in 4 Australians not having the essential digital skills or affordable access to digital devices they need to fully participate in today's society,¹ not-for-profits (NFPs) are relied upon to not only have a digitally capable workforce, but also to support their communities to use digital technology.

As Australia transitions to a digital-first economy and services delivered by Government, corporates and NFPs move increasingly online, investment in digital inclusion within the NFP sector is essential to make sure no one is left behind.

A healthy NFP sector is a digitally included NFP sector.

All Australians who are part of the NFP sector or access the sector's services need to be digitally confident, skilled and resilient, and have access to affordable technology and data. As such, it is essential that the Blueprint Expert Reference Group adopt a vision and action plan for the NFP Sector that has digital inclusion at its heart.

Good Things Foundation supports the development of a NFP Sector Development Blueprint that:

- 1. Puts the important role of digital inclusion front and centre in the NFP sector**
- 2. Future-proofs the digital capability of the NFP sector**
- 3. Recognises the significant expertise within the NFP sector and the community to lead and adapt to change, which can be extended on with additional support**
- 4. Is implemented with specific funding support, a people-first approach and without additional administrative burden placed upon the sector.**

Good Things Foundation thanks the Blueprint Expert Reference Group for the opportunity to provide its perspective and recommendations on the Not-for-Profit Sector Development Blueprint. We would be pleased to discuss our feedback with you, so that together we can ensure the NFP sector's digital capability is secured.

¹ Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Holcombe-James, I., Ormond-Parker, L., & Ganley, L. (2023). Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra.

Digital inclusion in Australia

We live in a rapidly changing world, where the ability to access, afford, and effectively use digital services is not a luxury. Digital inclusion is a requirement for full participation in contemporary life to enable people to access essential Government, education, social and health services. Digital inclusion is more important than ever.

However, 1 in 4 Australians are digitally excluded.²

A digitally excluded person is unable to access the benefits of being online because they don't have the digital skills, confidence or the right device and affordable internet connection needed to get online.

Often access, affordability and confidence factors interplay with each other to influence levels of inclusion. Without an affordable and reliable internet connection, there is reduced access to information, digital services, and communication channels with community, family, individuals, and Government. Without confidence or digital skills, people are unable to make full or safe use of an internet connected device once they have it, or understand how it may be beneficial to their life.

Even Australian adults who access online services may be struggling to remain digitally included. Good Things Foundation's research shows that 1 in 5 Australians feel overwhelmed by the constant changes in tech, with 63% not feeling confident that they can keep up.³

This 'digital divide' between those who can and can't keep up affects some groups of people in Australia more than others. People on low incomes or with low levels of education, people with disability, First Nations people, new migrants/refugees, and people over the age of 65 face the greatest risk of being left behind in our digitised world.⁴ These groups are also the groups more likely to access support from Government and NFP services, including support to use or keep up with rapidly changing digital technologies. They can also be essential members of the NFP workforce, both as paid staff and volunteers.

Ultimately, digital inclusion is a driver of social inclusion. It provides access to information, services, connections with the community and greater employment and education opportunities. For example, older Australians who accessed our Be Connected digital skills program were safer online, more socially connected and more digitally skilled.⁵

As such, a healthy, future-proofed NFP sector is a digitally included NFP sector and community. This is why inclusion needs to be at the heart of the new NFP Sector Development Blueprint.

² Thomas et al (2023)

³ Good Things Foundation Australia (2023), Australian Attitudes to Getting Online.

⁴ Thomas et al, (2023); Good Things Foundation Australia (2021), Digital Nation Australia 2021.

⁵ McCosker, A., Tucker, J., Critchley, C., Hiruy, K., Walshe, J., Suchowerska, R., Barraket, J. (2020) Improving the digital inclusion of older Australians: The social impact of Be Connected. Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

the community due to technological challenges. The sector faces technology barriers including funding for digital technology, staff capacity and capability, as well as access to affordable, skilled technical resources. Most small organisations do not have a tech roadmap in place, which negatively impacts their workforces satisfaction and confidence in their organisation's digital capabilities.⁷

These trends are concerning, especially given that the NFP sector helps many Australians who need support to cope with the current cost-of-living crisis, and rising demand for services causes existing resources to be stretched.⁸ If barriers preventing affordable digital access and resourcing within the NFP sector are not overcome, the sector's ability to meet the growing needs of communities may be threatened.

The role of Good Things Foundation

Good Things Foundation manages a national network of 4,000 community organisations who deliver essential digital skills training in local communities across Australia. We deliver programs including the Australian Government-funded [Be Connected](#) program for over 50s and the national Get Online Week campaign, and build capacity in community organisations through digital mentor training and resources, grants and program support.

Since 2017, we have trained thousands of NFP staff and volunteers to become digital mentors. We are actively working with NFPs to diversify and expand our programs to reach more people most at-risk of digital exclusion. We have distributed hundreds of digital skills program learning resources and over \$30 million in small grants to our network, who have in turn helped hundreds of thousands of people to get online more safely and confidently.

Our partner organisations vary in size from small, volunteer-run support groups meeting local needs to large organisations registered as charities and delivering services nationally. Just as they are diverse in size and scope, they are diverse in their location, with our network partners based in every state and territory, and 73% based in regional and remote locations. They include libraries, community centres, disability support services, training organisations and multicultural groups, united by our shared passion to close the digital divide.

We know how important it is for NFPs and all community based organisations to continue to strengthen as society becomes more technologically advanced. A strong NFP sector that is community-led, collaborative and digitally inclusive is central to our communities, our democracy and our economy. Our network of committed community partners and our work is key to delivering on this ambition.

⁷ Infexchange (2023), 2023 Digital Technology in the Not-for-profit Sector

⁸ ABC (2023), Charities struggle to survive rising costs, increasing demand, dwindling resources, ABC news online published 22 April 2023.

Our vision for a digitally inclusive and resilient NFP sector and society

The growing digitisation of our society and the organisations operating within it impacts not just how NFPs provide services, but the skills needed in their workforce to deliver their support and their community to access them. As stated in the NFP Sector Development Blueprint, “this raises significant concerns related to the accessibility and responsiveness of automated services to people’s specific contexts and needs, and issues of digital exclusion. At the same time, some NFP organisations are looking to the possibilities of digital transformation to innovate to prevent and respond to social and environmental issues, and improve their services”.⁹ This is a challenging environment which NFPs are tasked with operating within.

Ensuring all Australians can get online safely, confidently and affordably is essential to increasing social and economic participation, including people’s ability to work and volunteer for NFPs and access their support. Affordable access to devices, data and digital skills, enables Australians to access community, Government, health, employment, education and other essential services. A digitally inclusive NFP sector, where staff, volunteers and service recipients have the digital skills to be resilient to change and access to affordable data, technology and devices is vital.

Good Things Foundation’s vision is that there is a whole of Government approach to digital inclusion, supported by a national digital inclusion strategy. Closing the digital divide is not just an issue for the NFP sector, it is an essential issue that crosses all sectors. But, the NFP sector does play a critical role delivering digital inclusion programs to those who need it most and are well versed in doing so in a changing environment. The opportunity for NFPs to lead the way in the development and use of digital technology is immense and the ability of Government to drive through digital inclusivity initiatives within the NFP Sector Development Blueprint will make a lasting difference for all.

⁹ Department of Social Services (2023)

Key Qualities of the Sector

A modern, thriving society needs a strong NFP sector that is digitally enabled, capable, resilient and inclusive. Good Things Foundation supports the development of a NFP Sector Development Blueprint that reflects the qualities and values of the sector, with digital inclusion at its heart.

1. Digitally enabled, informed by evidence and data capable

NFPs are increasingly relied upon to digitally transform to meet Government and other funders' requirements for digital service delivery, data collection, cyber security and social impact reporting.

Our network is working hard to plug resource gaps and close the digital divide the best they can, with over 6,000 digital mentors recruited by our community partners since 2021 and ready adoption of our small grants programs to run digital inclusion programs. They show passion and interest in learning about new technology and helping their community to be resilient to digital changes. But, they can't do it alone. Further investment is essential.

More can be done to make the NFP sector and communities truly digitally inclusive and resilient.

Recommendations:

1. The NFP Sector Development Blueprint adopts digital enablement and inclusion as a core principle of its implementation for community organisations and their workforce (paid and volunteer).
2. Investment in technology and platforms that facilitate easier data collection, storage and cyber security capability within the sector is essential.
3. A review of reporting requirements and processes that reduce the administrative burden on NFPs and enable efficient monitoring and gathering of evidence and outcomes data is needed.

2. People-powered and centred

Communities are the experts of their own circumstances. They understand the barriers and solutions that are required to inspire change and mobilise action. 'People power' can motivate volunteers, staff and beneficiaries to actively participate in decision-making processes and behavioural or community change initiatives. This helps to spur on social change, for the better. It is critical for a NFP Sector Blueprint to value a people-powered and people-centred approach.

This is important when considering digital inclusion in relation to the sector. At its core, digital inclusion is about people, not technology. By empowering people to build their digital skills and confidence, NFPs across the nation empower whole communities and create a society that's digitally inclusive. We recommend that the Blueprint encourages the NFP sector to co-design solutions with the people who will use them, be it digital inclusion programs or technology upgrades.

3. Collaborative and connected

We know that by working together and staying connected, NFPs can achieve more than they ever could alone. This is essential to reflect in the NFP Sector Blueprint.

Our experience in delivering digital literacy programs through our network of 4,000 community partners over the past 6 years has shown that localised support can drive impact at scale when different partners work collaboratively together. For example, the Be Connected program is a partnership between two Australian Government agencies, Good Things Foundation and thousands of local organisations - ranging from the smallest volunteer-led support group to some of the largest registered charities in the country. We develop the digital skills and confidence of digital mentors working in grass roots organisations in local communities. These digital mentors then go on to support digital learners and raise the digital skill level of communities. The result is a whole-of-community approach to digital inclusion that tackles digital exclusion from the ground up, in local communities. Together, we've reached over a million people with digital skills support. We are happy to share our experience establishing this model to support ongoing conversations on how collaborative approaches in the sector can have impact at scale.

While we recognise the power of collaboration, it is not without its difficulties. Partnerships take time and resources to get right. Expectations of the extent of collaboration possible within the current NFPs competitive funding environment and resource constraints must be recognised and managed.

4. Effective and responsive to change

The NFP sector of the future must be effectively resourced to respond to emerging and new technology. When NFPs are resourced with appropriate support, systems and funding, they become more resilient and can play a greater role in helping individuals to adapt to changing social circumstances. We've seen this most recently during the COVID-19 pandemic where NFPs mobilised and adapted to support people in need during a time of crisis. Further, the sector plays a significant role in strengthening communities with digital skills support during such times of change.

Technology is rapidly changing and emerging, and the Australian population is struggling to keep up. This means that ongoing learning and development, planning and funding for new tech implementation will be critical.

For example, the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies has the potential to support broader participation in society for people who have been excluded. AI is already becoming an essential part of how Australian NFP organisations operate, with one in four making use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT and 69% currently using or planning to use AI tools over the next 12 months.¹⁰ Such new tech has the potential to reduce administrative burden, support outcome metrics measurement and automate tasks, enabling the workforce to put more resources into mission and impact. However, while the opportunities associated with AI and new tech are real, so are the risks

¹⁰ Infoxchange (2023)

and harms if not properly developed, implemented or governed. The real potential for harm can be seen in the experiences of people as a result of the implementation of Robodebt in Australia.

As technology continues to evolve and more data is captured by the sector, roles within the NFP sector may undergo transformation. Digital skills are essential to almost all forms of work today and the NFP sector is no different. In addition to ensuring staff and volunteers are digitally confident, safe and skilled to do their jobs, the NFP sector supports the people most likely to be digitally excluded.¹¹ This means that their workforce needs to feel confident enough to not only keep up with tech changes in their workplace but to help others to use technology to fully participate in our digitised world. Being data capable also requires the NFP sector to be data safe, with strong cyber security starting with skilled and informed people. Together, this emphasises the need for ongoing learning and development of the NFP workforce.

With technology moving so quickly, the impact of AI and new tech on people who are already digitally excluded is also not really known. What we do know is that if people are already digitally excluded, their ability to actively keep up with these advances is reduced. Additionally, the successful integration of AI and emerging technology in the NFP sector will depend on the organisation's readiness for technology adoption, the ability of their workforce to support beneficiaries to adapt to new service models, and the financial backing to support the implementation of new tech in a planned and strategic manner.

For the NFP sector to be resilient and responsive to digital changes, there must be:

- Research and collaboration across Government, industry and NFPs to explore the potential for new technologies to increase the NFP sector's capability and capacity.
- Investment in the use of new and emerging technologies to assist the sector to deliver their services in a more efficient, effective and impactful way.

5. Diverse, inclusive and cross-culturally capable

The ideal NFP sector of the future must celebrate the strengths that can be gained through diversity and inclusion.

As a digital inclusion charity, we recognise that social change requires the combined efforts of diverse organisations. Our work has shown how small, grass-roots organisations right through to large non-profit organisations, in all locations from rural and remote Australia to the city, and representing people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds can work together to deliver programs to meet their communities specific needs. A strong, diverse sector can ensure that those most in need of support can be provided it in a culturally appropriate, local and meaningful way. This sector diversity must be encouraged through the systems that support it, which is a key role that Government can play. This may include translated and digitally accessible resources, and funding eligibility and reporting requirements.

¹¹ Thomas et al (2023)

Just like our network, a sector that promotes diversity, inclusivity and cross-cultural capabilities will be able to achieve a greater level of social change. Such a sector will ensure that all voices are heard and respected, so that we are creating social change that's for everyone, together and for good.

6. Resourced and resourceful

Already, the NFP sector is resourceful, and makes the greatest impact with the lowest costs possible. For the Blueprint and sector to be effective, resilient and digitally inclusive it needs to be resourced appropriately. This includes funding levels keeping up with CPI increases and new initiatives required of the sector (such as outcomes measurement or regulatory requirements) coming with additional implementation support. In saying this, we recognise that transparency and accountability must also remain key when NFPs co-design digitally inclusive solutions in order to strengthen an equitable partnership between NFPs, Government and corporate funders. A future, digitally inclusive NFP sector must also enable NFPs to increase their own internal capacity for policy advocacy and engagement. This would strengthen their voice and influence on decisions that affect them, their work and their community.

(See priority areas 'Government funding, contracting and tendering' and 'Philanthropy and volunteering' for more information).

Priority Areas for Action

In order to achieve progress on the Key Qualities proposed in the Blueprint and our vision for the sector, Good Things Foundation recommends the Government focus on the following Priority Areas for Action as core enablers.

1. Improved digital inclusion and capability

A healthy NFP sector is a digitally included NFP sector. We recommend that the Government:

- Places a stronger focus on digital inclusion in NFP funding and grants
- Allocates dedicated, national funding and resources to support NFPs in improving their digital inclusion efforts and assisting their communities to support digital literacy for all people who need support, not just older people.
- Develops and implements a national digital inclusion strategy for the NFP sector, with a focus on closing the digital divide.
- Invests in digital literacy training and support programs for NFP staff and volunteers so that they are more confident and able to provide support to others.
- Supports the development of accessible and culturally appropriate digital resources and tools, which will assist NFPs in reaching their other goals.

2. Support for digital transformation

While the NFP sector are leaders in implementing community-based digital inclusion initiatives and respond well to changing environments, the sector needs additional, funded support to implement digital transformation initiatives within their own organisation and keep up with tech changes. We recommend that the Government:

- Provides targeted funding and technical assistance to support NFPs in their digital transformation journeys, including technology infrastructure, software licences, and project management expertise
- Establishes a dedicated digital transformation hub for the NFP sector to offer resources, training, and support to help NFPs support their communities
- Promotes collaboration and knowledge sharing among NFPs and encourages NFPs to share best practices and successful experiences
- Advocates for policies that promote innovation and digital development in the NFP sector. This may include tax incentives for investment in technology and support for research and development.

3. Support for digital inclusion of volunteers

Volunteers are an essential part of the NFP sector workforce. They play an important role in delivering services, including acting as 'digital mentors' in digital inclusion programs. To keep up with the digitisation of work and services, they need to be included in digital inclusion initiatives. NFPs in our network report struggling to find enough volunteers to keep up with the demand for their digital skills support. As such, we recommend that the Government:

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- Ensures that any targeted funding for workforce digital capability development in the NFP sector is inclusive of volunteers (new and potential volunteers) and paid staff
 - Promotes the important role that volunteers can play in closing the digital divide, and funds initiatives that support the recruitment of more volunteers into this important role in the NFP sector.

4. Information Technology, communication and marketing

Not everyone knows about the important support NFPs can provide when it comes to digital inclusion programs. Conversely, the NFP sector have deep connections to community and know where digital access divides are, but are not resourced to close them. While NFPs fill the gap as best they can, including through our own initiatives such as Get Online Week, we recommend that the Government:

- Provides funding for digital inclusion marketing initiatives to motivate people to take action towards maintaining or growing their digital skills, and improve understanding of affordable technology and data solutions such as financial hardship provisions
- Supports the development of an NFP sector led National Data & Device Bank. Just like a FoodBank, data and device banks can distribute free technology and data through the NFP networks who have existing community connections to reach those most in need of digital inclusion support.

5. Government funding, contracting and tendering

While the Government is an important funder of the NFP sector, less than half of the sector actually access this funding support.¹²

Good Things Foundation believes additional funding must be given to the NFP sector to enable organisations to be resilient and adaptable to digital transformation (see 'Key Qualities' above). Our successful network model shows that this does not have to be administered by the Government itself. In our role as a national grants manager, we have distributed and managed over \$30 million in small grants to community-based organisations on behalf of funders including the Australian Government. These grants range in size from \$1,000 to \$50,000, and have been provided to extremely diverse organisations including small volunteer-led support groups who may not have the means to access other Government funding programs. Core to this model is grant funding coming alongside a package of training, support and ready-to-use resources, creating a holistic capacity building package. This is a model that could be adapted to address other NFP funding gaps.

Action can also be taken to expand eligibility requirements for digital inclusion support or education funding, to account for individuals and organisations that have significant expertise in the field but fall out of the VET, RTO or registered charity space. Many NFPs have deep connections to community and provide trusted spaces for people to learn, but

¹² ACNC (2023), cited in Department of Social Services (2023)

may not have capacity to maintain such accreditations. Funding eligibility requirements must better reflect the full scope of expertise available throughout the NFP sector to reduce the barriers to entry of government funding, encourage innovative models and support emerging or micro-level organisations.

We have also seen that the term of funding contracts is important, with longer contracts providing more sector-wide stability, security and surety, reducing administration and increasing certainty. We support calls from the NFP sector to increase the length of service-delivery focused funding contracts.

Additional actions that should be considered for future funding and contracting within the NFP sector include:

1. Adopting a 'pay what it takes' approach: Ensuring that Government funding supports all aspects of NFP services, including administration, training and service delivery. At present many of the organisations in our network need to top up their Government funding with other funding sources which places additional burden, uncertainty and reporting requirements on them.
2. Incorporating CPI increases into multi year funding agreements: To account for increasing costs of resourcing and service delivery over the course of the contract.
3. Streamlining and simplifying funding reporting processes to create a strong, future NFP sector: The Government must reduce administrative burden whenever possible. For example, although we absolutely support the need for comparative outcomes reporting across programs, the Department of Social Services Data Exchange (DEX) System is challenging to implement across our nationally networked programs and the data collected does not tell the whole story of the impact of programs. In addition, even with the inclusion of external evaluations of new programs and some contribution for participation in this, the true cost of program reporting is not often covered by funding provided. Reducing administrative burden while maintaining transparency and accountability will free up more resources to focus on direct service delivery.
4. Encourage philanthropy: Develop policies and programs that incentivise private giving and donations to charities, and cross-sector co-funding.
5. Engage in collaborative planning: Consult with charities and other stakeholders when designing and implementing funding programs to ensure they are fit for purpose and able to be managed and delivered effectively.

6. Advocacy: protection of NFP rights to advocate

We believe that a strong, digitally empowered NFP sector must have the right to advocate freely about all matters that concern it. We have seen that digital technology provides a perfect platform for NFPs to share the impact of their work and reach more people who need their services. Our experience also shows that it is important that organisations who fund or provide other supports to NFPs are able to advocate on their behalf. For example the power of traditional and online media to share the stories of people on the ground whose voices are not always represented or heard is immense. Educating NFP staff,

volunteers and the people they support to tell their own stories is an important strategy that will amplify the impact of the sector.

We recommend that the NFP sector is supported to learn to use digital technologies to advocate for themselves and the people they support. This would require funding and education for NFP staff, volunteers and individuals who are willing to share their stories to enable them to effectively advocate to Government and across all sectors.

7. Philanthropy and volunteering

Volunteering is an essential component of the NFP sector and yet many of our network partners tell us that it's increasingly difficult to recruit and retain the volunteers needed to successfully deliver digital inclusion programs.

The National Strategy for Volunteering provides useful solutions that map out how we can better support, recruit and retain Australia's volunteer workforce. Good Things Foundation supports the priorities of the National Strategy for Volunteering, including its vision, focus area and aims and strategic objectives. In particular, that volunteering must be:

- digitally inclusive, diverse and accessible
- safe and ethical
- community-led
- invested in by the Government
- celebrated and recognised as important
- well-resourced.

We recommend that Blueprint Reference Group consider reforms to develop new and innovative funding models (crowdfunding, social impact bonds and more) for the volunteering sector, and encourage new models of social enterprises that generate earned income to contribute to financial sustainability.

The digital capacity and skillset of the volunteer workforce must also be supported for it to continue to strengthen in the face of global digital transformation. Professional development of volunteers must be invested in, providing individuals with opportunities to train and develop their digital skills in the areas of fundraising, marketing and financial management (see above Key Qualities and Action Areas). Leadership development programs that boost digital literacy skills and confidence of new and emerging volunteer leaders should also be a priority action.

Conclusion

Good Things Foundation is in full support of the NFP Sector Development Blueprint and recognises this important opportunity for the Government to support a digitally inclusive, resilient and well resourced for-purpose sector.

NFPs are relied on to not only ensure their own workforce is digitally capable, but also ensure the people they support are able to participate in civic, economic and social life using digital technology.

Ensuring everyone in Australia is digitally capable requires a whole of Government approach, with further investment in staff and volunteer training as well as direct service provision.

The NFP sector needs to be recognised for the important role it plays in supporting and building a digital society and economy, and funded appropriately to meet the digital development needs of their own workforce and the needs of the people they support.

A healthy NFP sector is a digitally included NFP sector. A sector that leaves no one behind. Digital inclusion across Australia is achievable by working together with NFPs, all levels of Government, corporates and communities.

By adopting our recommendations for the NFP Sector Blueprint, we hope that we can seize the opportunity to build a fair and digitally inclusive Australia, for good.

About Good Things Foundation Australia

Good Things Foundation Australia is a social change charity, helping people improve their lives through digital. We work with thousands of community organisations across Australia to support those hardest to reach, to improve their digital skills.

We coordinate and deliver the Australian Government funded Be Connected program for over 50s and build capacity in community organisations through digital mentor training and resources, grants and program support.

We develop and deliver a range of specialised digital inclusion programs for people who are most at risk of being left behind in our online world, including women, people with disability, low income families, and migrants and refugees.

Each year we host Get Online Week - our national digital inclusion campaign supporting millions of Australians to get online and improve their digital skills.

Our programs are community led, delivered at scale and create maximum social impact. We advocate for the 1 in 4 Australians who are digitally excluded and raise awareness of the importance of closing the digital divide, for good.

Learn more about our work: www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au

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Good Things Foundation Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to their Cultures, Country and Elders past and present.