

CONSTITUENT QUESTION

ASKED BY: Ms Jen Butler MP

ANSWERED BY: Hon Jo Palmer MLC, Minister for Education

QUESTION: My question is from a group of St Helens residents. The St Helens Online Access Centre (OAC) will close as of the end of June due to your government's budget cuts. The service is essential for the community and only costs the government a lousy \$25,000 a year. The OAC is a vital service to that community and, like libraries, the OAC offers digital community support, assisting people one-on-one in real time with government departments such as MyGov, Centrelink, banks and numerous other functions; everything is now online. With an average of 6516 interactions per year with two-thirds of users aged over 65, without this service, many residents simply will not cope. The St Helens OAC staff volunteers are outstanding at what they do. Why did you decide to stop funding this St Helens OAC?

ANSWER:

It is not accurate to describe these changes as budget cuts. The Government is seeking to strengthen not reduce access to digital support in St Helens.

In 2024, an independent review of *Digital Inclusion in Tasmania* was commissioned to better understand how services could be strengthened and made more sustainable into the future.

While the review recommended the phasing out of Online Access Centres (OACs), the government has chosen a different approach. Where there is a clear duplication of services, we are transitioning digital inclusion support to local library sites, while maintaining the remaining eleven OAC sites, and increasing funding at those sites.

The St Helens OAC is located inside the St Helens library building and occupies about half of the space. The library is open for 39 hours per week, the OAC for 20 hours per week. The size of the library space is currently inadequate for community needs. As part of these changes, the St Helens library will be able to expand and the space currently used by the OAC will be open to the community for an extra 19 hours per week, including for digital inclusion purposes.

From July Libraries Tasmania will enhance digital inclusion support in St Helens by:

- Providing one to one digital support
- Installing two additional computers.

Libraries Tasmania has a strong statewide digital volunteers' program and warmly invites any St Helens OAC volunteers to continue their valuable work through the library service.

Libraries Tasmania staff are continuing discussions with the Online Access Centre to ensure a smooth transition, and will continue to welcome staff and volunteers who wish to remain involved in supporting digital inclusion in the community.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jo Palmer'.

Hon Jo Palmer MLC

Minister for Education

Date: 18.6.26