



1 November 2024

## **Submission: Productivity Commission Inquiry – Opportunities in the Circular Economy**

The Reconnect Project welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the circular economy.

As a registered charity and accredited social enterprise, The Reconnect Project is a leading example of how the circular economy can benefit society, reduce environmental impacts of rare mineral extraction and provide employment opportunities to marginalised groups.

### **Information Request 1: Circular Economy Success Story**

Founded in 2019, The Reconnect Project's mission is to close Australia's digital divide by distributing refurbished mobile devices (smartphones, tablets and laptops) to disadvantaged community members.

With no support from government or equipment manufacturers, we have to date provided 2,950 refurbished devices to women fleeing DV, newly arrive refugees, at-risk youth and people recovering from mental health episodes or exiting the justice system. ex-offenders. Our focus is on the repair and refurbishment of already existing technology, thereby extending its' life and stopping the items from prematurely entering the downstream e-waste process.

Individuals, businesses and schools donate their decommissioned technology to us. Each device is securely erased to ensure data security, before then being repaired or refurbished. Items that cannot be repaired due to OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) proprietary constraints are used as harvest devices for spare parts. Mobile phone screens that have broken glass, but the LCD is still functioning, are sent to a local small business that replaces the glass – providing us with refurbished screens at a much lower cost.

Any items and components that we cannot repair, reuse or refurbish, are sent to Australian-based e-waste facilities for recycling and materials recovery.

In April 2024, The Reconnect Project was awarded the National Banksia Sustainability Award for Circular Economy. In December 2023, we received the NSW Government Sustainability Award for Circular Economy.

### **Information Request 2: Priority Opportunities to Progress the Circular Economy**

Our funding is limited and heavily reliant on philanthropic foundations. To ensure our long-term sustainability, we have developed income-generating business units as a social enterprise:

1. We operate a repair shopfront serving the local community with high quality repair services to mobile phones, tablets, laptops, computers, electronics and some electrical appliances. The repair workshop is primarily staffed by neurodivergent young adults that we have trained.
2. We are actively engaging in the refurbished device resale marketplace and sell some of our refurbished items via eBay, Reebelo or direct to customers.
3. We have developed Australia's first Mobile Device Repair training program as a vocational education package and are currently piloting the course with neurodivergent young adults who lack opportunities to find work in the repair or IT sectors. We are also in the process of having the training program accredited by the Australian Skills & Quality Authority.

Technology donors and repair customers choose us because we are creating positive impact in three ways: environment, social justice (digital equity is a recognised UN human right) and inclusive employment. The need in the community for access to quality refurbished technology is so great, that demand for our refurbished device distribution service far exceeds our current capacity.

### **Information Request 3: Hurdles and Barriers**

Five years since our humble beginnings (with only \$5,000 in crowdfunding to get started), we have all the systems and processes in place to now replicate our model in additional locations, providing quality repair services to the public and employment opportunities for neurodivergent young adults. It is frustrating to see government funding directed to downstream waste management projects (recycling) yet there is no support for repair and reuse initiatives such as The Reconnect Project.

Aside from funding, the biggest challenge we face is from the OEMs. Parts-pairing of individual components within smart devices strangles the independent repair industry and is anti-competitive as consumers are directed back to the OEM for expensive repair services. Devices that are Apple ID or Google account locked are non-viable for us to refurbish and our emails to OEMs go unanswered when we ask for assistance to unlock devices donated to us in good faith. The Reconnect Project is actively engaged in the Australian Repair Network and Right to Repair movement.

In summary, independent repair services make fantastic small or micro-businesses and provide flexible employment opportunities in the circular economy. The Reconnect Project is ready to scale and increase our social and environmental impact.

Sincerely,

Annette Brodie  
Founder & CEO